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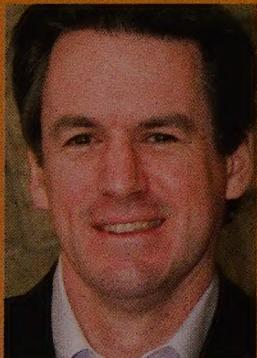
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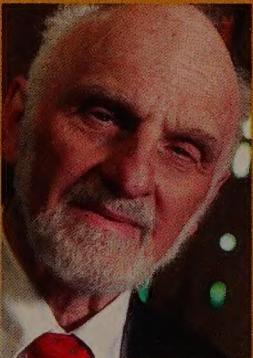
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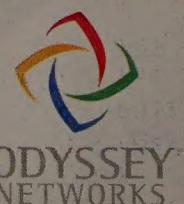
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## Good news in brief

ART AND HELEN ROMIG were memorable people in my life. Art's parents were Presbyterian missionaries; he grew up in China at a time when the Presbyterians alone had 500 missionary workers in China. He studied at the College of Wooster in Ohio, then attended Princeton Seminary. Art courted Helen, a social worker in New York City, and they married and returned to China as missionaries. Helen and the children were evacuated to the U.S. during the Japanese occupation; Art was held in a prison camp for several years. After the war the Romigs returned to China but were sent home again, this time by the new communist government.

Art continued his ministry as a pastor and presbytery executive before "retiring" to central Ohio, where I met him. He joined the staff of the congregation I was serving, and we worked together until he retired again, this time to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Helen, an accomplished artist, had a collection of ancient Chinese gravestone rubbings that were of interest to Chicago's Field Museum. They were invited to visit the museum, and my wife and I hosted the Romigs during their stay. One night we ate dinner at a Chinese restaurant. Art ordered for us in Chinese, of course, and before we knew it he was engaged in a

lively, animated exchange with our waiter. The young man hurried off, and Art said, "Wait till you see this!"

Suddenly the wait and kitchen staff had gathered around our table and were engaged in an enthusiastic and increasingly chaotic discussion. Art explained to us that the entire staff, all students at the University of Illinois at Chicago, were from the village in western China where Art and Helen had lived and served years before. Art was inquiring about people he'd known there, some of whom he'd baptized. It was an unforgettable reminder of the reach of the global church.

Whenever I preached a sermon that was a little dense, with one too many references to illuminate an obscure point, Art would gently explain that one of the skills mission workers had to learn was to articulate the gospel simply. The proclamation of the gospel, Art said, should never be intellectually anemic but simple and direct enough that anyone could understand it.

In this issue we asked a few of our favorite authors to proclaim the gospel in seven words (or fewer). The pithy responses remind me of Art's wise advice. In our culture, the basic Christian vocabulary is increasingly esoteric to many. It's a useful exercise to say it simply, in a way anyone can understand.

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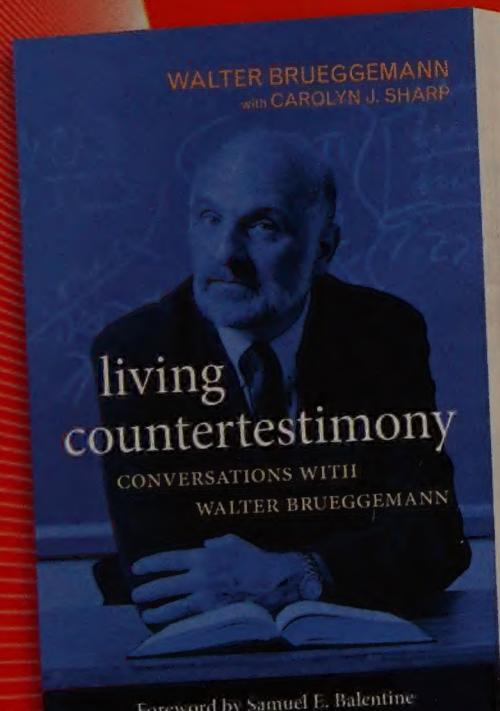
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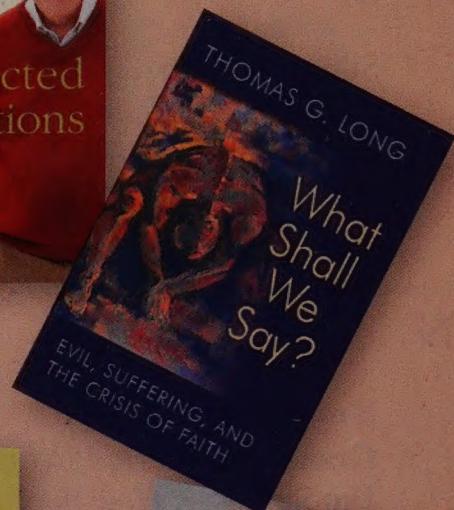
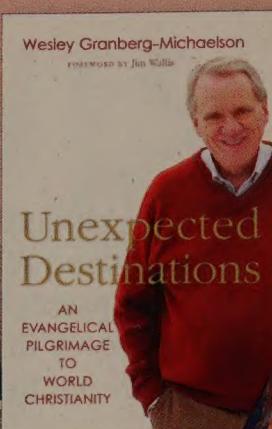
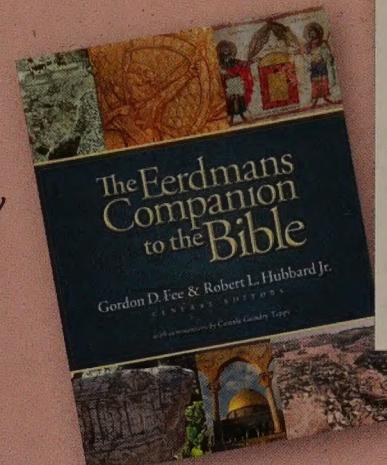
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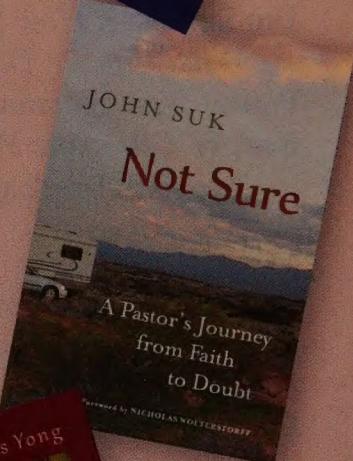
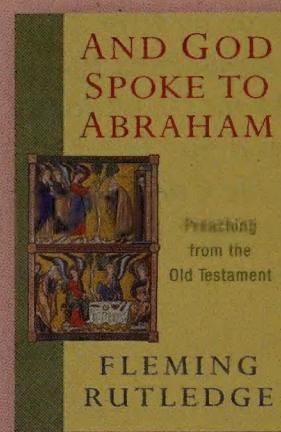
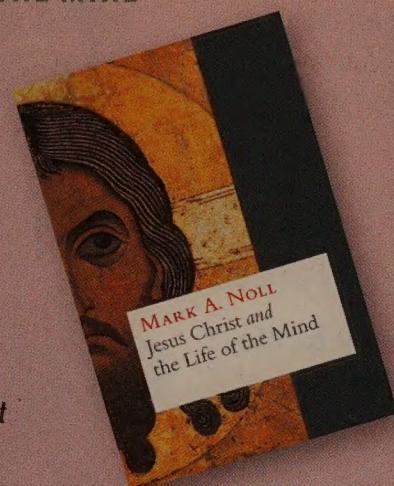


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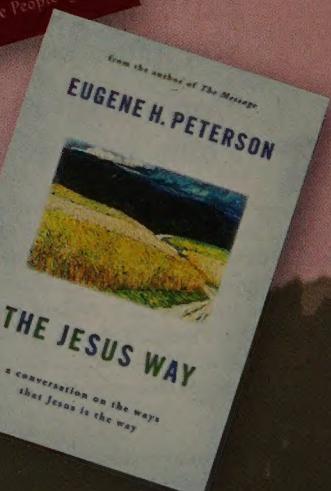
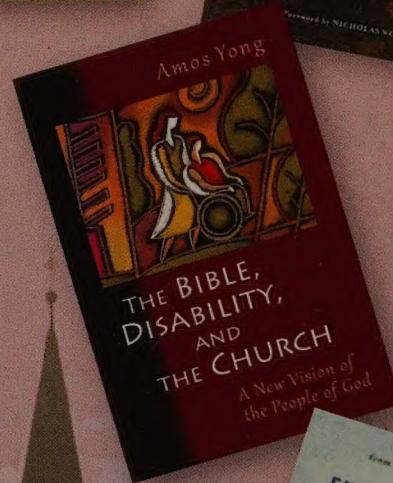
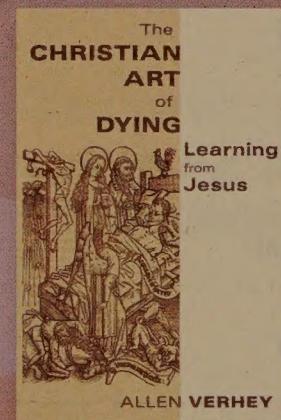
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## Farm bill blues

September 5, 2012

The U.S. is experiencing its worst drought in decades, and countless crops have been lost. Farmers with federal crop insurance can make up some of their losses; others don't have this option. While the farm bill reauthorization process has produced bills that include disaster relief, none has come close to becoming law. As for the current farm bill, it expires September 30, leaving its omnibus package of agricultural and food-assistance programs unfunded and uncertain—unless Congress reaches a deal first. And Congress is on recess until after Labor Day.

American farm policy badly needs an overhaul. Current policy focuses on propping up grain and soybean production on a massive scale, resulting in an artificially cheap abundance that is fed to livestock, dumped on foreign markets or converted into junk food and fuel. This comes at the expense of small farmers and local economies both at home and abroad. Its nutritional and environmental effects are devastating as well.

An ambitious reform agenda would instead subsidize fruits and vegetables, incentivize sustainability and lend a hand to smaller producers and new farmers. Advocates worked tirelessly to make the 2007 farm bill a vehicle for significant reform. By the time the bill was signed into law in 2008, they had been forced to settle for incremental change—and for the hope of accomplishing more when reauthorization came up again in 2012.

It wasn't to be. Last fall, the House and Senate agriculture committees met behind closed doors to hammer out an agreement. While this effort failed to produce a bill, it did prevent reform advocates from having much influence. In June, the Senate passed a bill containing little good news. Then the House committee passed an even worse bill. (The full House never voted on this measure, though it did pass a stand-alone bill of disaster relief spending—offset and then some by cuts to conservation programs.) By the August recess, reformers had been reduced to hoping that Congress passes any farm bill at all.

If it does, the bill won't be inspiring. It will preserve the agribusiness status quo while dialing back conservation efforts. It will cut food stamps, a crucial safety-net program (the fate of which is senselessly yoked with farm policy). If the House committee's language prevails, global food aid will be made less effective, while regulations on genetically modified seeds will be rendered toothless.

The alternatives, however, are worse. A short-term extension of some kind would keep the farm bill's programs alive past September, but it would leave farmers unprotected and uncertain and larger policy questions unresolved. The other option—doing nothing and letting the 2008 farm bill expire—would be chaotic and destructive.

The farm bill is enormous in scope. It represents a mess of irrational, unhelpful policy; it's also responsible for some essential programs. It needs to be reauthorized. Then it's back to the longer-term work of building a food system that does right by farmers, eaters and the land.

**Amid the worst drought in decades, it's not clear Congress can pass any relief for farmers.**

# CENTURY marks

**GOD IN THE ROCKS:** Early in his career, Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin told his spiritual director that he intended to abandon his interest in rocks and natural philosophy to focus on the spiritual life. His spiritual director responded that if he were to do so, he'd be abandoning his vocation as a Jesuit, since Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, urged his followers to find God in everything, no matter what they were doing (James F. Salmon SJ, with Nicole Schmitz-Moormann, in *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, Wiley-Blackwell).

**TARGET AUDIENCE:** Joseph S. Khalil says we miss the meaning of the book of Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth or preacher) unless we understand its central intention, which is to challenge overconfident preachers who claim to know the ways

and will of God. "God's inscrutability is evident in the illogicality of life," says Khalil. Qoheleth is particularly critical of those who think they know God's will with respect to reward and punishment. "Who is like the wise man?" Qoheleth asked. The question is a challenge to all human wisdom and understanding; it points to human limitations about knowing the ways of God in the world (*Word & World*, Summer).

**TRUE JOY:** According to a fable, St. Francis of Assisi told Brother Leo that true joy comes not from success but in rejection and suffering, which cause us to reflect on Jesus' pain and rejection. St. Francis compared it to coming back to the friary on a cold winter night and being told by the person who came to the door that he was a simpleton, that he couldn't come in and should go

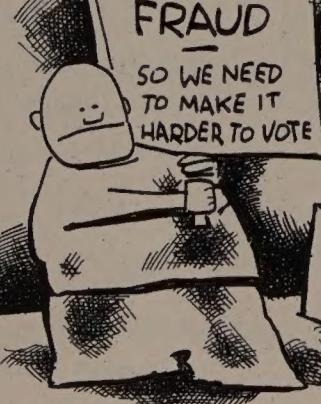
away. It's not that suffering is good for us. The point is that pain is a reality of life and that God is present in all reality, including pain and suffering (*Weavings*, August/September/October).

**IN THE FISHBOWL:** Episcopal priest Barney Hawkins says that parishioners take an interest in the personal lives of priests and pastors and their families. He recalls that in one parish he didn't want to call attention to the car he drove, so he didn't trade in his cars until necessary—and then bought replacements that were much the same as the previous model. When he was roasted before leaving that parish, some members put on a skit—with photos for documentation—about the three gray boxy station wagons he had owned while serving there. Hawkins says that church members look at ordained leaders for their authenticity and their flaws (*Episcopal Etiquette and Ethics*, Morehouse).

**OVERCOMING COMPLEXITY:** Steve Jobs's success at Apple may have sent the wrong message to some entrepreneurs: to be successful, you have to ignore your family and be ruthless with your employees. Walter Isaacson, Jobs's biographer, says we should learn lessons from Jobs's accomplishments, but not from his personality. Stay focused and keep things simple were two principles, among others, that guided Jobs. At an annual retreat with people he considered the leaders at Apple, the group would come to consensus on the top ten things the company should focus on next. Jobs would cross off the bottom seven and say, "We can only do three." Simplicity of design for Jobs was a way of overcoming complexity, not of ignoring it (*Harvard Business Review*, April, and *Wired*, August).

## PUZZLE TIME

I'M WORRIED ABOUT  
**VOTER FRAUD**  
SO WE NEED  
TO MAKE IT  
HARDER TO VOTE



•Find the fraud in this picture

BONUS POINT:  
FIGURE OUT THE MOTIVE! —

TOE

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**PAST IMPERFECT:** David Barton's historical revisionism about American history has been wildly popular with conservatives who want to believe, like Barton, that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that the founding fathers did not share modern notions about the separation of church and state. Mike Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas and a Republican candidate for president in 2008, said he wished that every American could be made to listen to a telecast of David Barton lecturing, even if at gunpoint. However, Barton's latest book, *The Jefferson Lies*, has drawn criticism not just from liberals or professional historians, his usual critics, but from a group of evangelical pastors, black and white, from Cincinnati. They called for a boycott of Barton's publisher, Thomas Nelson, because the book seeks to justify Thomas Jefferson's ownership of slaves and glosses over the third president's racism and heretical views about Christ. Thomas Nelson has since pulled the book from the market (NPR, August 8, and *World*, August 9).

**SHOPPERS' CHOICE:** "Walmart Moms" are defined by the superstore chain as women with children 18 years of age or younger living at home and who shop at Walmart at least once a month. The Bentonville, Arkansas-based company studies this group very carefully, including their political leanings. President Obama won a majority of their votes in 2008, but their votes are up for grabs in 2012. Obama's advantage with Walmart Moms drops dramatically in the battleground states that are likely to determine the outcome of the presidential election this fall (Bloomberg.com, August 2).

**SK AND FDR:** The late Howard A. Johnson, an Episcopal priest, theologian and Kierkegaard scholar, was invited to the White House near the end of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's life. Roosevelt picked his brain about Kierkegaard, since he had been told that Kierkegaard's later writings helped to explain the rise of totalitarianism and Nazism. Frances Perkins, Roosevelt's biographer, said that the hour-long conversation made an impression on

**“**The music that comes from these bands is incredibly violent and it talks about murdering Jews, black people, gay people and a whole host of other enemies. It is music that could not be sold over the counter around the country. **”**

— Mark Potok of the Southern Poverty Law Center, speaking about neo-Nazi bands with ties to Wade M. Page, accused of killing six people last month in a shooting rampage at a Sikh temple near Milwaukee (RNS)

**“**Religious freedom is not just about religion. It's not just about the right of Roman Catholics to organize a mass, or Muslims to hold a religious funeral, or Baha'i to meet in each other's homes for prayer, or Jews to celebrate High Holy Days together—as important as those rituals are. Religious freedom is also about the right of people to think what they want, say what they think, and come together in fellowship without the state looking over their shoulder. **”**

— Secretary of State Hillary Clinton upon the release of the 2011 International Religious Freedom Report (U.S. Department of State, July 30)

Roosevelt, as he spoke of it often afterward. "I have never been able to make out why people who are obviously human beings could behave like that," Roosevelt said, speaking of the Nazis. "They are human, yet they behave like demons. Kierkegaard gives you an understanding of what it is in man that makes possible for these Germans to be so evil" (*Anglican Theological Review*, Winter).

**SHADES OF SEX:** A hotel in the United Kingdom has placed a copy of E. L. James's erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* in each room instead of the Bible. Defending the switch, the hotel manager said: "The Gideon Bible is full of refer-

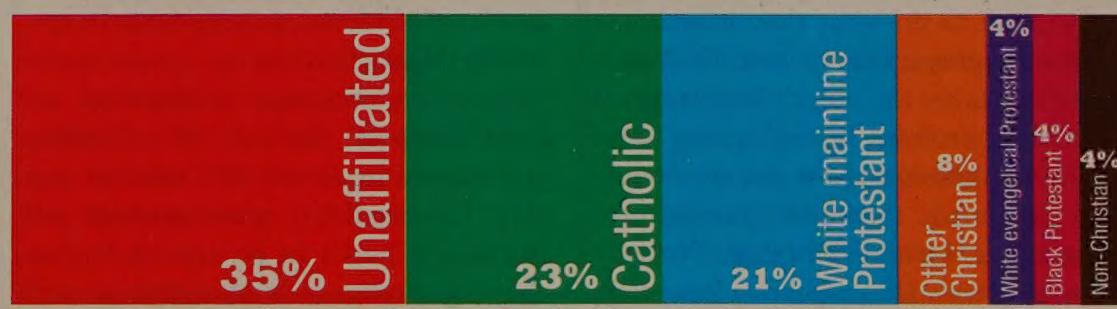
ences to sex and violence, although it's written using more formal language. So James's book is easier to read." Guests who would like a Bible can ask for one (*Christian Science Monitor*, July 25).

**PRAYERS OF TWO CITIES:** Clergy in Tampa, Florida, and Charlotte, North Carolina, sites of the Republican and Democratic conventions, issued a statement called "A Common Witness." The statement notes the wide political divisions in the country, encourages those involved in the political process to argue respectfully and not use religion to garner votes, and invites prayers for peace (hydeparkumc.org)

## UNAFFILIATED MILLENNIALS

SOURCE: PUBLIC RELIGION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AND BERKLEY CENTER FOR RELIGION, PEACE & WORLD AFFAIRS AT GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

In a recent survey, one fourth of college-age persons (18–24 years of age) said they are religiously unaffiliated. The religious status of these unaffiliated millennials while growing up was:



Due to rounding, total does not equal 100%.

# It looks like a wedding

by Charles Hefling

EPISCOPALIANS now have an officially approved way to do what some of them have been doing, informally and unofficially, for quite a while. In July the church's General Convention gave its blessing to blessing. By a surprisingly large majority vote, it authorized for provisional use a liturgy that prescribes what is to be done and said at a service of blessing a same-sex union.

Like every liturgical text, this one is, among other things, an expression of theological convictions. Inasmuch as the Anglican tradition to which the Episcopal Church belongs has typically found its theological identity in appointed forms of common prayer as much as in confessional formulas, it is all the more appropriate to ask what beliefs will be enacted when the new liturgy comes into use in Advent. What does this service say, theologically, about the church that has produced and endorsed it?

It would be a mistake to suppose that what is most obvious about the rite is what the rite obviously is. What is obvious is how closely the "shape of the liturgy" conforms to what used to be called "The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony" and is now "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage." A congregation gathers; a couple joins them; the presiding cleric explains why they are all there. After readings from scripture and a sermon, the couple is presented and the presider asks each of them whether they truly mean to do what they have come for. Stated prayers are recited. Then each of the two takes the other's hand, repeats a solemn promise, gives a ring—and finally, on these promises and the couple who have made them, the presider pronounces a formal blessing. Nobody would say, with Shakespeare's Benedick,

"This looks not like a nuptial." That is just what it does look like.

Yet a nuptial it is not. The Episcopal Church has not endorsed marriage equality. Neither church law nor the Book of Common Prayer entitles two persons to marry each other, or a member of the clergy to officiate at the marriage, unless one of the two is a woman and the other a man. General Convention did nothing to change that. The rite it did approve studiously avoids the terminology of marriage, let alone matrimony; what the presider pronounces when all is said and done is that the couple are "bound to one another in a holy covenant, as long as they both shall live." Whether this form of words can be construed as constituting *civil* marriage in those states that permit two men or two women to marry, the lawyers will have to decide. If it can, the paradoxical consequence would seem to be that a same-sex couple, legally married by an Episcopal cleric acting with episcopal permission as an agent of the state, will not be married according to the church's own rubrics and canons.

**A**ppearances notwithstanding, then, the new liturgy makes no claim that couples of the same sex can, in the ecclesiastical sense, marry. What it does say is more interesting. It says, explicitly and by implication, that two persons, both men or both women, are capable of making with each other a covenant so sacred, so religiously or spiritually significant, as to invite public recognition, welcome, celebration and benediction on the part of a Christian community in an act of Christian worship. This capability is not, perhaps, self-evident. It needs to be argued for, and the argument needs to refute a well-

worn syllogism: "The church can bestow its blessing only on what God already favors. But God does not favor same-sex coupling; far from it. Therefore . . ."

The commission that framed the new rite appears to have taken this reasoning seriously. The long *apologia* it provided implicitly accepts the major premise: liturgical blessing is not creation *ex nihilo*; while it indeed makes something new begin to happen, it does so on the basis of something which, by the grace of God, is already happening. A formal blessing on the part of the church is both thanksgiving for what happens and petition for its continuation, enhancement, perfection. It follows that promises, which initiate but do not necessitate some determinate future, are eminently blessable—depending, of course, on *what* future is being promised.

In the case of the new Episcopal liturgy, the couple promise to support and care, hold and cherish, honor and love, forsaking all others, as long as they both shall live—vows much the same as those made by brides and bridegrooms. The theological question is not whether two women or two men can genuinely utter this kind of performative speech. Of course they can. The question is what they are performing—what their speaking does and whether doing it can be an effective sign, a "sacrament," of divine grace.

To judge by the rite itself and the *apologia* that comes with it, promising to live together faithfully and lovingly can be, God willing, cooperation with God in bringing about the eschatological consummation, the new creation, that is God's own promise. Or, to put it as the commission does, what this liturgy for witnessing and blessing witnesses and blesses is a covenant that embodies the

church's missional character as the people of God in the world. Either way, it is collaborative participation in the divine purpose that makes the lifelong union of two persons not only blessable in itself but also a blessing to others.

By building its argument around the forward-looking biblical notion of covenant, the commission responsible for proposing the new liturgy has taken a theological stand somewhat removed from the traditional Augustinian concern with quarantining sexuality. The vows themselves are traditional enough, but the rationale for blessing them has shifted toward discerning in relations of intimacy anticipations of the life of the world to come. This shift—from Genesis to Revelation, so to say—is evident but not obtrusive throughout the new liturgy: in the opening address to the congregation, in the collects and the petitions of the litany, and (if they are used) in the eucharistic preface and postcommunion prayer.

But never does the wording call attention to the fact that the two principal ministers are both men or both women. Although that fact is the reason for composing a new liturgy in the first place, it is almost incidental to the liturgy as composed. The text could be used, just as it stands, by a man and a woman. They would be inaugurating a covenant with the same content, meaning and purpose as the one same-sex couples will make. Conversely, the theological rationale for blessing a same-sex couple's union applies equally well to marriage as the Episcopal Church now defines it.

At least one diocese, in a state where same-sex marriage is lawful, has already taken this theological trajectory to its logical conclusion. Diocesan clergy have their bishop's permission to use a single, multipurpose rite when presiding at a marriage—any marriage—and the rite they are to use is a slightly tweaked version of the one approved at General

Convention. Perhaps that is what the commission had in mind all along. For the theology on which its liturgy rests does not attempt to justify same-sex

covenants as unique or exceptional; it regards them, as it does marriages in the conventional sense, simply as variations on the same theme. CC

## THE CELEBRATION AND BLESSING OF A MARRIAGE

The Book of Common Prayer (1979)

### The Collect

O gracious and everliving God,  
you have created us male and female in  
your image:  
Look mercifully upon this man and this  
woman who come to you seeking  
your blessing,  
and assist them with your grace,  
that with true fidelity and steadfast love  
they may honor and keep the promises  
and vows they make; through Jesus  
Christ our Savior,  
who lives and reigns with you in the  
unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for  
ever and ever.

### The Marriage

In the Name of God,  
I, N., take you, N., to be my wife (hus-  
band),  
to have and to hold from this day for-  
ward,  
for better for worse,  
for richer for poorer,  
in sickness and in health,  
to love and to cherish,  
until we are parted by death.  
This is my solemn vow.

### The Blessing of the Marriage

God the Father, God the Son,  
God the Holy Spirit,  
bless, preserve, and keep you;  
the Lord mercifully with his favor look  
upon you, and fill you with all spiritual  
benediction and grace;  
that you may faithfully live together in  
this life, and in the age to come have  
life everlasting.

## THE WITNESSING AND BLESSING OF A LIFELONG COVENANT

(authorized for provisional use in 2012)

### The Collect

Gracious and everliving God:  
assist by your grace N. and N.,  
whose lifelong commitment of love  
and fidelity we witness this day.  
Grant them your blessing, that with firm  
resolve  
they may honor and keep the covenant  
they make;  
through Jesus Christ our Savior,  
who lives and reigns with you in the  
unity of the Holy Spirit, one God,  
for ever and ever.

### The Commitment

In the name of God,  
I, N., give myself to you, N.  
I will support and care for you:  
enduring all things, bearing all things.  
I will hold and cherish you:  
in times of plenty, in times of want.  
I will honor and love you:  
forsaking all others, as long as we both  
shall live.  
This is my solemn vow.

### The Blessing of the Couple

God the Father, God the Son,  
God the Holy Spirit,  
bless, preserve, and keep you,  
and mercifully grant you rich and bound-  
less grace,  
that you may please God in body and soul.  
God make you a sign of the loving-  
kindness  
and steadfast fidelity manifest in the  
life, death,  
and resurrection of our Savior,  
and bring you at last to the delight of the  
heavenly banquet,  
where he lives and reigns for ever and ever.

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## Sikhs remembered for piety, kindness

People gathered early that fateful Sunday at the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin to meditate on God and to serve others—key requirements of their religion. Six of them were fatally shot August 5 as they performed customary acts of prayer and kindness.

A man of habit, Suveg Singh Khattra, 84, once a dairy farmer in the Punjab region of India, was on hand well before the 11 a.m. service that day. He was accustomed to getting up every morning at 4:30 to watch the news and a live broadcast from India of readings from his faith's holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

Then he would catch a ride to the nearby temple in the Oak Creek suburb of Milwaukee, where he would pray and help prepare meals. "Whoever needs to eat can just walk in," said Khattra's granddaughter, Sandeep Kaur Khattra, 24. "Nobody ever suspects [strangers] because we have a lot of visitors who watch and observe, and they join us for our meals."

That Sunday, Wade Michael Page, 40, a tattooed army veteran who played in hated-filled music bands catering to white supremacists, killed himself after he was wounded by local and federal authorities responding to the shootings.

Page shot Khattra, police said. Khattra's daughter-in-law saw his body in the temple sanctuary as police led her and 15 others out of the kitchen pantry, where they hid from the gunfire.

Satwant Singh Kaleka, 62, ran to confront Page—living up to the Singh name given to most Sikh men. It means *lion*. Gurus have taught for 500 years that the Sikh faithful stand for justice.

Kaleka—president of the congregation he helped to found in 1997 and who helped to build the temple in 2007—was armed only with a small knife. Police said they found it near his body.

It may have been the small, dull knife carried by faithful Sikh men, a symbol of their willingness to defend all without concern for caste or class. Or it may have been a butter knife from the kitchen, which is built next to the prayer hall in many gurdwaras, as the Sikh temples are called.

Every house of worship has people like Khattra and Kaleka—those who come early and set up the chairs, stack the programs or prepare food in the kitchen for all who are hungry for both God and lunch.

Paramjit Kaur, 41, drove over to Oak Creek from Milwaukee every Sunday to pray and pitch in. She was living up to the Kaur name given most Sikh women. It means *princess*. Her friend, Manpreet Kaur, called Paramjit sweet, outspoken and devoted to her two sons and her

faith. Her sons, Harpeet Saini, 18, and Kamal Saini, 20, told CNN that the shooter took their world away.

The Washington-based Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund estimates that more than 500,000 Sikhs live in the U.S., though the actual number may be considerably smaller. Their communities have been targeted by a growing number of hate crimes since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The New York-based Sikh Coalition reports that more than 700 such incidents have taken place since 2001. The question is why.

"The turban is the main issue here," said Pashaura Singh, a professor of Sikh and Punjabi studies at the University of California, Riverside. "People confuse Sikhs with Osama bin Laden."

Following 9/11, bin Laden and his al-



**SHOOTING AFTERMATH:** Attendees sign a banner during a prayer vigil three days after six victims died August 5 from a shooter's bullets at a Wisconsin Sikh gurdwara, or temple. The vigil at Washington's Lafayette Park, in view of the White House, conveyed prayers and empathy expressed by religious leaders.

Qaeda associates were often shown in media reports wearing white turbans. Combine that with a lack of basic knowledge about Sikhs living in the U.S. and you get tragic—and sometimes violent—cases of mistaken identity.

“Numerous reports have documented how those practicing the Sikh religion are often targeted for hate violence because of their religiously mandated turbans,” wrote a group of 92 House members to Attorney General Eric Holder in April. The House members called on Holder to begin collecting data on hate crimes committed against Sikh Americans.

Rupinder Singh, a California health-care administrator who writes the blog American Turban, has heard taunts of “terrorist” and “Osama” as he shops at the mall. “When I walk into a restaurant or an airplane, all eyes are on me,” he said.

But Singh said he would never consider taking off his turban. “It is such a core part of our identity,” Singh said. “I could never imagine separating from it.”

Founded in India in 1469, Sikhism is often confused with Hinduism or Islam, but it is part of neither. The religion teaches that there is one God but many paths to the divine, and it abjures proselytism.

Each of the faith’s ten founding gurus wore turbans, called *dastars*, but it was the last guru, Guru Gobind Singh, who instructed all male members of the faith to wear them. (The requirement is optional for women.) The reasons ranged from political to theological.

Sikh gurus rebelled against India’s strict caste system, teaching instead that people are essentially equal in God’s eyes. Turbans, typically worn by the upper class, should be worn by the lower classes as well, the gurus taught, in order to symbolize that equality.

But the turban is more than a political symbol. Like Orthodox Jews who wear yarmulkes or Catholic nuns who don habits, Sikhs believe that the turban is a visible declaration of humility before God and commitment to their faith.

Out of respect for God’s creation, Sikhs do not cut their hair, instead knotting it each morning and wrapping it in five meters of cloth, which protects the hair as well as the mind, said Pashaura Singh. —USA Today/RNS

## Clergy urge Americans to defend religious minorities

A group of religious leaders representing seven faith traditions have called for something more than a period of public mourning after a week that saw a shooting rampage at a Sikh temple and a suspicious fire at a Missouri mosque.

“It is my hope that this is more than a time to express personal sorrows,” said Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. “Our most concrete rejection of violence occurs when we engage the neighbor, the neighbor who is new in our community, the neighbor who worships differently than we,” he said.

The gathering was mostly virtual—a national conference call sponsored by Shoulder to Shoulder, an interfaith group founded in 2010 to combat a surge of anti-Muslim sentiment. Faith leaders came together on August 9 in the wake of several recent acts against religious minorities.

On August 5, a gunman shot and killed six Sikhs at their Wisconsin temple. The following day, fire razed a Missouri mosque. It was the second fire at the mosque this summer, after a July blaze that investigators have determined was arson. Meanwhile, a Tennessee mosque has struggled to open despite protests from critics across the nation.

Kathryn Lohre, president of the National Council of Churches, encouraged congregants to participate in a national day of prayer on August 12 in support of the Sikh community. She also advised Americans to visit Sikh temples.

“We are also encouraging congregations across the country to be responsive to the gracious hospitality of our Sikh brothers and sisters who are opening their gurdwaras for prayer and fellowship and mutual understanding,” she said.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said that religious groups must together focus their efforts against hate crimes. “America is the most religiously diverse nation in the history of humankind,” Saperstein said. “Hate crimes are not just mere acts of violence.... They are a betrayal of the promise of America.”

Also taking part in the conference call were Catholic Bishop Denis J. Madden; Imam Mohamed Magid, president of the Islamic Society of North America; Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, and Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky, director of the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue at the Jewish Theological Seminary. —Lauren Markoe, RNS

## Missouri prayer amendment passes by wide margin

Voters in Missouri have overwhelmingly approved a “right to pray” amendment to the state’s constitution, despite concerns about the measure’s necessity and legality. Amendment 2 received nearly 80 percent of the vote.

The language on the August 7 ballot stressed the rights of citizens to express their religious beliefs and the rights of children to pray and acknowledge God in schools.

State Rep. Mike McGhee, a Republican who sponsored the amendment, said it would remind people about their religious freedoms. “It’s OK to bring your Bible to study hall,” he said.

The measure also stated that students could be exempted from classroom activities that violate their religious beliefs. It was not clear how that exemption would be regulated. McGhee has said it could vary by age group.

The amendment was backed by Missouri’s four Catholic bishops and the state’s Southern Baptists. The Episcopal Diocese of Missouri and several non-Christians groups opposed it. Legal experts almost unanimously predict that the amendment will wind up in court.

Pediatrician Ellen Thomas, 48, said the amendment seemed like propaganda. “I really just think it’s designed to stir up angry sentiment,” she said, adding that “there’s no infringement on people’s right to pray as it is.”

Still, the amendment passed by a 7-1 margin. “I was glad to see it,” said Margie Cravens, 87, as she left her Columbia polling place. “And we need prayer now more than ever before.” —RNS

## Nuns reject Rome takeover, seek dialogue with bishops

AMERICAN NUNS facing a Vatican takeover of their leadership organization have rejected Rome's plans to recast the group in a more conservative mold, but declined—at least for now—to respond with an ultimatum that could have created an unprecedented schism between the sisters and the hierarchy.

Instead, the nuns said they wanted to pursue a negotiated solution to the showdown that has galvanized American Catholics in recent months and prompted an outpouring of support for the sisters which left the Vatican with a black eye.

The statement from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious came in St. Louis at the end of the LCWR's annual assembly August 10. It was the first formal response to the Vatican from the entire organization, which represents most of the 56,000 nuns in the U.S.

The Vatican announced in April that it was assigning a team of bishops to take control of the LCWR in order to make the organization—and by extension, most U.S. nuns—hew more closely and publicly to orthodox teachings on sexuality and theology.



**TALK, NOT SURRENDER:** Franciscan Sister Pat Farrell, outgoing president of the large Leadership Conference of Women Religious, counseled having dialogue with the Vatican but without loss of integrity.

Sister Pat Farrell, the outgoing president of the LCWR, at the assembly's closing read the official response that expressed the organization's "deep disappointment" with Rome's verdict. But the statement also said the nuns wanted to keep talking with the hierarchy in hopes of "creating more possibilities for the laity and, particularly for women, to have a voice in the church."

"Dialogue on doctrine is not going to be our starting point," Farrell told reporters. Farrell added, however, that the sisters will reconsider their options if the LCWR "is forced to compromise the integrity of its mission"—indicating that if the Vatican does not relent on at least some of its plans to revamp the organization, the sisters could make good on the threat to disband the LCWR and reorganize it as an independent body beyond the reach of the Vatican.

The sisters' pointed but measured response seemed to reflect the approach that Farrell outlined in a powerful address to the 900 sisters attending the assembly. Her talk detailed the nuns' public "struggle to balance our life on the periphery with fidelity to the center."

Farrell spoke of how the sisters have historically been committed to serving the poor and marginalized as well as to pushing boundaries within the church. That sometimes led to suppression by the hierarchy, she said, but also to sainthood for many nuns—and to far-reaching changes that have benefited Catholics as a whole.

Farrell's point, and one that seemed to emerge with growing force over several days of contemplation and deliberation, was that the sisters could not continue to expand the church's frontiers on behalf of laypeople and others if they placed themselves beyond the institutional church.

"There is an inherent existential tension between the complementary roles of hierarchy and religious [the nuns] which is not likely to change," Farrell told the sisters. —David Gibson, RNS

## Anti-Obama black pastors group has conservative ties

Since William Owens launched his national campaign in May calling on African Americans to withdraw their support of President Obama because of his stance on gay marriage, the minister has claimed the backing of 3,700 black clergy and touted his organization as predominantly Democratic.

But Owens and his group, the Coalition of African-American Pastors, are drawing criticism from black leaders and the political left who note Owens's long-standing ties to GOP politicians. They charge that CAAP misrepresents itself as a nonpartisan grassroots organization when it is actually backed financially by right-leaning conservative groups.

"He is the poster person of conservative evangelicals... who are trying to use this as an emotional wedge issue to divide the black community," said Amos Brown, pastor of the Third Baptist Church in San Francisco and a protégé of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

Owens has become an outspoken critic of Obama since the president announced in May that he was switching his position on gay marriage. The pastor has railed against Obama in cable news network interviews and has held a series of news conferences warning that Obama is in danger of losing black voters' support.

He has also vowed to collect 100,000 churchgoers' signatures in support of "traditional" marriage and made plans to hold an August 16 rally in Memphis, his hometown, to focus attention on the issue.

The coalition describes its organizers on its website as a "nonpartisan group of truthfully mostly Democrats." But interviews and a review of tax documents reveal deep connections with the right:

- Owens was appointed this year as the African-American liaison for the National Organization for Marriage, a Washington-based group opposed to same-sex marriage that has endorsed Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

- Frank Cannon, head of the American Principles Project, a group opposed to same-sex marriage, confirms that his group's political action fund is paying the public relations firm Shirley & Banister to assist CAAP's communications strategy.

- CAAP received loans totaling \$26,000 in 2004 from the conservative Family Research Council, American Family Association and Mississippi Tea Party activist Ed Holliday, according to its IRS filings.

Owens, who didn't respond to requests for comment, endorsed 2008 GOP presidential contender Mike Huckabee and Ohio GOP gubernatorial candidate Ken Blackwell.

"CAAP bears all the hallmarks of a front group," said Michael Keegan of the liberal People for the American Way. "Owens presents himself and his group as nonpartisan or, if anything, leaning in the direction of the Democrats. That makes him more useful to religious-right groups and easier to book on cable news."

NOM set out to find African-American spokespeople to develop "a media campaign around their objection to gay marriage as a civil right" and "provoke the gay marriage base into . . . denouncing these spokesmen and women as bigots," according to internal documents unveiled earlier this year in a Maine lawsuit.

Maggie Gallagher, cofounder of NOM, called the language in the internal documents "regrettable" but denied that the group's alliance with Owens reflects a wedge strategy. "The belief that this is somehow a front group, I think, is unfair to the majority of black pastors that have appeared with Reverend Owens."

Polls show black voters are deeply divided on gay marriage. Still, "this idea that there are going to be black voters coming out against a candidate or coalescing for a candidate on one issue is simply not true," said William Barber, president of the North Carolina chapter of the NAACP. —Aamer Madhani, *USA Today*; Ray Locker contributing

## Muslims petition Egypt not to include Shari'a

Muslim and Coptic Christian leaders in the U.S. are calling on the Egyptian government to exclude any mentions of Islamic law or language that discriminates against minorities in its draft constitution.

In a letter released August 7, the leaders urge the constitution writers to "recognize the equality of all Egyptians and to reject any language that would discriminate against any citizen of Egypt on the basis of that citizen's religion or gender." Because Egypt is home to millions of Christians, attempts to describe Islamic law, or Shari'a, as the source of the country's law should also be rejected, the letter said.

Shari'a is interpreted differently by various schools within Islam; some Muslims believe Shari'a is a personal code that has no place in government, while in several Islamic countries—Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, Sudan and others—Shari'a infuses national law.

Egypt's recently elected president, Mohamed Morsi, was backed by the Muslim Brotherhood but has pledged to be "the president of all Egyptians."

Signatories of the letter include Rep. Keith Ellison (D., Minn.), the first Muslim elected to Congress; Imam Mohamed Magid, president of the Islamic Society of North America, the largest Muslim organization in America; and Hegomen Moises Bogdady and Michael Sorial, priests with the Coptic Orthodox Archdiocese of North America. The letter was sponsored by James J. Zogby's Arab American Institute. The Egyptian embassy in Washington did not reply to requests for comment.

The letter represents an unusual move by U.S. Muslims to try to shape policy toward Muslims and non-Muslims in a Muslim-majority country like Egypt, especially against a backdrop of attempts in some 20 U.S. state legislatures to ban Shari'a from state courts.

The letter is also an important interfaith document between Muslims and Coptic Christians, whose relations have been strained in recent years. —Omar Sacribey, RNS

CHRISTINE HURNEY / RECONCILINGWORKS



**FORMAL RECOGNITION:** Not until 2009 did the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America approve of openly gay or lesbian ministers for church positions. But in 1994 a St. Paul church called lesbian Anita C. Hill (left) to ministry, and in 2001, the St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church ordained her as a pastor "extraordinarily"—a step that led to the congregation's censure by the ECLA. On August 11 this year, Hill was installed as a regional director for ReconcilingWorks (formerly known as Lutherans Concerned), now an officially recognized advocacy group working to encourage full participation of LGBT people. Giving the sermon at the installation service was Bradley Schmeling (right), a gay pastor who was a controversial figure supported by his congregation before all prohibitions against partnered gay and lesbian pastors were dropped by the 2009 Churchwide Assembly.

## Most Americans keep their faith private while online

Meet the social media “nones.” A new survey finds that though most Americans are religious, they generally do not use social media to supplement worship and mostly keep their faith private online.

The Public Religion Research Institute survey found about one in 20 Americans followed a religious leader on Twitter or Facebook. A similar number belonged to a religious or spiritual Facebook group.

The results seem to defy the familiar story of prominent religious leaders using social media to build a following—and a brand. “We were surprised when this turned up really low levels of people engaging religion and faith online,” said PRRI research director Daniel Cox.

Cox said churches face many challenges in connecting with people via social media. Megachurches may reach a large audience that way, but the majority of Americans attend smaller houses of worship that lack the resources to run social media campaigns, Cox said. In addition, the millennial generation, which most strongly embraces social media, doesn’t attend services as often as older generations.

According to a recent Pew survey, one-third of adults who use the Internet do not use social networking sites. A significant minority of Americans do not access the Internet. The Pew survey also found that half of Facebook users didn’t list their religious affiliation on their profile.

Alan Rudnick, pastor of First Baptist Church of Ballston Spa in upstate New York, considers Facebook and Twitter essential for reaching out to his congregation and local community. But Americans, he said, may be reluctant to label themselves for personal spiritual reasons or out of fear of being ostracized.

“Because social media on Facebook and other places is so easily accessed, people are distancing themselves, because organized religion in a lot of circles has a negative connotation,” he said.

The PRRI survey of more than 1,000 respondents also found white evangelicals were much more likely to use social media for religious purposes, though

only a minority did so. One in four white evangelicals say they have listened to a sermon online or downloaded a podcast, compared to 6 percent each for Catholics and other Protestants.

The survey also found that 10 percent of respondents have taken video or photos with their cell phone during worship, and nearly as many admitted to sending or reading e-mail during services. —Chris Lisee, RNS

## Key rabbinic vacancy in Jerusalem stays unfilled

Some two years ago a group of journalists was invited to a meeting to discuss the election of a new Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Jerusalem. The post had been vacant for about six years. The mayor himself, Nir Barkat, was there, as was Rachel Azaria, a member of the city council who had organized the evening. The assembled journalists expected that some news would soon be announced.

Yet today the post is still unfilled—a sign of the ongoing conflict between ultra-Orthodox Jews, or *haredim*, and the non-*haredim*. The ultra-Orthodox may also be described as anti-Zionist, for they reject the legitimacy of the state of Israel.

By tradition Jerusalem has two chief rabbis, one for Sephardic Jews and one for the Ashkenazi. Sephardic Jews descend from communities in Spain and Northern Africa. Ashkenazi communities developed in Germany and Central Europe. Azaria had proposed that the Ashkenazi chief rabbi be a Zionist, a proposal warmly seconded by the secular mayor. Barkat outlined his vision of a Zionist chief rabbi who could present an image of tolerant, flexible Judaism.

In many ways, no one has been greatly troubled by the absence of a chief rabbi. The previous holders of the position were known more for their absence than their presence. Journalist Yossi Seidov castigated the chief rabbis (both now deceased) for doing little while receiving payment from the government.

The idea of having chief rabbis in the Holy Land for the community as a whole emerged prior to the establishment of the

state of Israel in 1948. The first Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Isaac Kook, and the first Sephardic chief rabbi, Jacob Meir, were appointed under the British Mandate. The practice continued with the establishment of the state of Israel, with appointments being made at the city level as well as the national level. Chief rabbis of cities deal with local religious services, marriage certifications, divorce, overseeing of kosher foods (especially in public places such as restaurants and hotels) and issues related to *mikva’ot* (ritual bath houses) and burial.

Jerusalem’s religious community is a complex mix of ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox and non-Orthodox factions. The Sephardim remain independent. The Sephardics’ choice to be their chief rabbi has been clear all along: Rabbi Yosef, a son of Ovadia Yosef, former Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel. The Sephardics agreed to go along with the election of a Zionist rabbi for the Ashkenazim as long as the Ashkenazim voted for Rabbi Yosef for the Sephardic post.

In recent years the ultra-Orthodox have grown in numbers and influence in Jerusalem. They constitute at least 29 percent of Jerusalem’s adult population and 50 percent of grade-one classrooms. Whereas modern Orthodox tend to work in regular jobs, the ultra-Orthodox, if they work at all other than studying Torah, tend to do so in the religious sector, doing such jobs as overseeing kosher food, registering marriages at the rabbinical offices, checking *mikva’ot* and supervising burials.

The *haredim* accept the state only as an unavoidable evil, not as a reality they are obliged to support. Nevertheless, the jobs they take in the religious sector are paid for by the government. Few of these employees are supervised by the government, however. Indeed, the norm is that a good number of these employees are paid in cash, with no questions asked. So far the chief rabbis, who have been drawn from the ultra-Orthodox camp or who support the *haredim*, have accepted this practice or looked the other way.

A truly Zionist chief rabbi who supports the state would presumably feel obliged to record every transaction that goes on, collect receipts and report information to the tax authorities. According

to Ilan Kaminetsky, who heads a group of representatives of Jerusalem synagogues, this prospect of such financial oversight is the main reason that the *haredim* resist having a Zionist chief rabbi.

A law passed in 2007 gives representatives of some synagogues a role in the election, thereby giving new influence to those outside the ultra-Orthodox community. Altogether 48 people can vote in the elections. Half of them will represent a select group of synagogues (out of the many hundreds that flourish in the city), and the other half will be members of the rabbinical establishment.

The Zionist camp has a candidate: Rabbi Aryeh Stern, a member of the so-called Tzohar group of relatively liberal rabbis, who are strict in issues of formal law but who resist the extremes of the *haredim*.

As for the mayor, despite his secular credentials he now prefers to support the *haredim*, who make up a good part of his governing coalition. Last year he forced Azaria out of his coalition, acting under pressure from local *haredi* politicians who objected to her attacking their more extremist moves, particularly their effort to limit the public role of women.

According to Azaria, the likelihood of an election taking place before next year's municipal elections is slim. This is Jerusalem, after all, where nothing happens till it happens. —Mordechai Beck

■ In a building swap, the Crystal Cathedral has announced it will move its congregation to a smaller Roman Catholic church after the iconic Protestant megachurch was sold to the Catholic Diocese of Orange, California. The cathedral, plagued by huge debt and squabbles among family members of founder Robert H. Schuller, will move to a space with less than half of its current seating capacity. Sheila Schuller Coleman, Schuller's daughter and the recent pastor at the cathedral, started a new church nearby in March. The cathedral's congregation is exercising an option in the sales agreement that permits it to move to St. Callistus Catholic Church in June 2013. The Catholic congregation at St. Callistus, and later the administrative offices of the diocese, will move to the Crystal Cathedral site.

■ A bill intended to help manage the Philippines' growing population moved forward in the legislature, challenging the clout of the Roman Catholic Church, which has been opposing such a measure for more than ten years. In a surprise move, 188 of the 231 Lower House representatives present in its August 6 session voted to end debate on the bill instead of waiting for a previously scheduled August 7 vote. The population of the Philippines, now at 94 million, is growing at 2 percent per year, one of the highest rates in Asia.

■ Tensions have heightened in central Nigeria following the killing August 8 of four people near a mosque, a day after 20 worshipers in a church in the Okene area of Kogi state were shot dead. According to news reports, in the mosque attack armed men arrived in a van and chanted Islamic songs before they assaulted some Muslims who were attending a Ramadan lecture at the Central Mosque in Okene. Two of the dead were soldiers on surveillance duty. In the church incident on August 7, armed men entered Deeper Life Bible Church and fired at worshipers. Some observers suspect that the extremist Islamic group Boko Haram carried out both attacks. Anglican Archbishop Nicholas Okoh of Nigeria urged the government to protect all Nigerians and urged Christians to desist from acts that would worsen the situation.

## People

■ **Richard Land**, the man who has been the public face of the Southern Baptist Convention on ethical and political issues for nearly 25 years, has announced plans to retire in 2013 after a rough-and-tumble spring. The decision comes months after Land, president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, made controversial comments about the Trayvon Martin case that resulted in a reprimand and the loss of his radio talk show for the racial tension they caused. Land, 65, said in a July 31 letter announcing his retirement that he has no intention of ending his role as a culture warrior, declaring that war "is a titanic spiritual struggle for our nation's soul."

■ **James E. Solheim**, the Episcopal Church's news director in an era bookended by the election of Anglicanism's first female bishop and the 2003 ordination of its first openly gay bishop, V. Gene Robinson, died August 8 of respiratory failure. A resident of Trenton, New Jersey, Solheim was 73. With graduate degrees from Luther Seminary and Columbia University, Solheim said he "followed an ecumenical path, working first for the Lutherans, then the Presbyterians and the United Church of Christ." He became communications director for the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts in 1988. "I had no idea that, a few weeks after I moved to Boston, the diocese would elect Barbara Harris as the Anglican Communion's first female bishop. The next year was a blur but provided a dramatic introduction to the Episcopal Church," he once recalled. Former Episcopal Presiding Bishop Frank T. Griswold III said Solheim, "in the midst of highly charged and emotional issues, always managed to remain focused and objective in his reporting. These were important gifts to the church, and signs of his own integrity both as a person and a communicator."

**Correction:** Luke Powery, named new dean of Duke Chapel, was incorrectly identified in the August 22 issue as an editor of the new Common English Bible. It is his brother, Emerson Powery, a Duke Ph.D. graduate now teaching at Messiah College, who holds the editing post.

## Briefly noted

■ The Church of England has sold its \$3 million worth of shares in Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. due to concerns about the company's ethics. Eight News Corp. journalists have been charged by British authorities in connection with a phone-hacking scandal. They are accused of hacking telephone lines belonging to celebrities, politicians, law enforcement officials and crime victims, as well as bribing police officers and paying private investigators for illegally obtained information. "The Church of England was not satisfied that News Corporation had shown, or is likely in the immediate future to show, a commitment to implement necessary corporate governance reform," the church said August 7.

# LIVING The Word

Sunday, September 9

Mark 7:24-37

ON AUGUST 2, 2010, a column in the *New York Times* struck a chord with a number of my colleagues—by the end of the day it was posted on the Facebook pages of more than 30 of them. These friends had one important characteristic in common with each other and with me. Each had graduated from seminary in recent years and each was serving in some ministry context, often in congregations. The first paragraph of reporter Paul Vitello's "Taking a Break from the Lord's Work" told the story:

The findings have surfaced with ominous regularity over the last few years, and with little notice: Members of the clergy now suffer from obesity, hypertension and depression at rates higher than most Americans. In the last decade, their use of antidepressants has risen, while their life expectancy has fallen. Many would change jobs if they could.

Vitello describes the crisis of overwork among ministers and the prevalence of "boundary issues"—problems they have when they are too easily overtaken by the urgency of other people's needs. How many weekends have been swallowed up by parishioners' birthday parties, graduations and anniversary celebrations? How many vacations have been delayed or cut short by situations that simply couldn't wait?

Perhaps our overwork and boundary issues have something to do with our model for ministry. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus pursued his vocation at a breakneck pace; he was always surrounded by crowds of people who needed something from him. Even when he left the crowds behind and escaped the Pharisees' provocations, Jesus had to manage a group of disciples who always seemed a step or two behind. Mark's Jesus was relentlessly driven by his mission to proclaim and embody God's kingdom. He rarely took a break from the Lord's work.

When Jesus did seek solitude, the results were disastrous. After arriving in the coastal region of Tyre (a beach vacation?), Jesus tried his best to escape notice by "closing the blinds" and keeping a low profile. No such luck. In this predominantly gentile region he was "immediately" (Mark's favorite pacesetting word) discovered by a gentile woman, a mother in great need. The vacation was in danger of ending abruptly, and Jesus resisted with harsh words and even name-calling.

In pastoral care class we seminarians learned this well-worn aphorism: when the shepherd is not fed, the shepherd eats the sheep. I know that when Jesus refers to children and dogs, we are meant to think of the children of Israel in contrast to the

pagan gentiles. But I can't help thinking of the intimate setting and the personal impact of these words. Could it be that Jesus was demanding, just this once, the opportunity to eat before he ministered? In the very next chapter, Jesus fed a crowd of 4,000 people who had not eaten for three days. Surely he was hungry then too, but there is no reference to him sharing the meal.

The fiery words of Jesus here, as off-putting as they may be, permitted an honest rejoinder from the gentile woman. His words provided an opening for a bold response that proved transformative. It may be, as many suggest, that the woman called Jesus back to the practice of his ministry, but I'm not so sure he had left it behind. Despite the high-gloss shine with which Jesus is often painted, his humanity did not diminish his ability to proclaim and embody God's kingdom: his humanity enabled his ministry.

So does ours. This lesson can be particularly hard for over-worked clergy to learn and appreciate. Easily overtaken by the urgency of other people's needs, we can be indifferent to our own needs, or to those of the ones closest to us. Too often I trick myself into believing that my extra workload is admirable sacrificial service, but it's not. Instead it creates unhealthy dependence and unrealistic expectations.

This became clear to me when a good friend in a previous congregation confronted me with this assessment: "When I see you working all the time, I become convinced that I'm supposed to do the same thing." Whether we embrace the fact or deny it, our lives are models for others. When we acknowledge our human limitations, we grant others permission to do the same. When we display the full human range of our emotions and responses, we invite others to more authentic living.

Jesus' words to the Syrophenician woman may not represent exemplary pastoral care. But they do perfectly represent his state of mind and emotion in that moment. They were deeply personal words of frustration and need, and they opened a door to sincere dialogue with a fellow human being in need.

One day, when I was an undergraduate in Stanley Hauerwas's Christian ethics class at Duke Divinity School, he told the class that the foundational ethical obligations of a Christian could be comprehensively summarized by the simple command to tell the truth. I believe this, yet often I misrepresent myself as a tireless and irreproachable servant of God who is always overflowing with energy and Christian charity. What I am instead is a flawed and fatigued fellow traveler. This is the truth as well as the starting point for genuine transformation.

After leaving Tyre, Jesus performed another miracle. But before healing a man who was deaf and unable to speak, Jesus looked up to heaven and sighed. In that sigh I can hear his humanity. I can sense the exhaustion of the one who only appears tireless. I can identify with that sigh—and take a little time off.

# Reflections on the lectionary

Sunday, September 16

Mark 8:27-38

**EVEN THOUGH** I grew up in a church manse, am the son of a minister and was raised by congregations of wonderful Christian believers, I had not heard *the* question until the summer after my junior year of high school. I remember being confused and slightly put off by the way in which it was asked. I remember the steady, waiting gaze of those sitting across from me in the circle.

It was a youth gathering at a friend's church across town. The church had a basketball court in the basement, and the evening of fun and hoops was to last until ten p.m. But at nine we were all brought into one of the youth rooms and asked to sit in a circle. The youth pastor offered a brief prayer, then said we were going to go around the circle and each answer the question: When did you accept Jesus Christ into your heart?

I knew that I'd been baptized at St. Andrew's on Sunday, November 1, 1982, and confirmed at Vandalia Presbyterian Church in 1995, but this information didn't seem to be enough. What the others in the circle were describing was a moment of decision, when they spoke words that welcomed Jesus into their hearts. Here I was, the preacher's kid, without an adequate answer to this question of great consequence. How embarrassing! Yet when the pastor asked if anyone wanted to accept Jesus that very night, I couldn't respond to that invitation either. Instead I stumbled back onto the basketball court with great uncertainty about where I stood with Jesus, or who he was to me.

These verses from Mark 8 are often understood as one of those critical moments of decision for the disciples, as their opportunity to accept Jesus into their hearts. This crew of 12 had enjoyed front row seats to the controversy surrounding a man whom some called prophet, some Messiah, some revolutionary and some blasphemous heretic.

Here, at the exact midpoint of Mark's Gospel, Jesus turned to the disciples on the road with two key questions. The first was merely descriptive. "Who do people say that I am?" What have you heard on the street and in the fields about me? The disciples had some good answers; they'd been listening to the public, and they repeated what they'd heard. They named Elijah, John the Baptist and the ancient prophets, thus passing this first test with flying colors. This was what the public opinion polls showed.

But Jesus was not finished with them. The next question was more personal and hard-hitting, moving from description to

confession. "Who do you say that I am?" This is the foundational question for people of Christian faith. Who is Jesus Christ to us? What differences does he make?

As the boldest of the disciples, Peter responded immediately: "You are the Messiah." From my vantage point, Peter had hit the bulls-eye.

Yet something was missing. We know this because the rest of the story is so odd, so hard to follow, so counterintuitive. Instead of congratulating Peter on a simple and direct answer to a tough question, Jesus silenced him, then began to predict his own suffering, death and resurrection. The juxtaposition is one of the oddest in all of scripture. Peter confesses his faith in Jesus as Messiah, and Jesus responds with ominous words of pain, rejection and death.

It is as if Mark wants to communicate two things at once: yes, Peter was right: Jesus was the Messiah. But he was *not* the Messiah that Peter expected or desired. Jesus made this point at the end of chapter eight, giving a warning against being ashamed of his life and words.

After scolding Peter, Jesus turned to the crowds that surrounded him and issued a challenge: if you want to become my

## Following Jesus as Messiah takes more than acceptance and assent.

followers, deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me. It is not enough to confess Jesus as Messiah. We must be ready to embrace *this* Messiah, the one who will question our deepest allegiances and demand absolute discipleship, the one who requires us to move from selfishness to generosity, from fear to love, from hatred to compassion, from the narrowness of self-righteousness to the wideness of mercy. If we want to follow this Messiah, it's going to take more than acceptance and assent, more than a moment of decision. It's going to take change in habits, assumptions and actions.

The earliest Christian affirmation was three simple words that meant everything to our ancestors in faith: Jesus is Lord. No one else is Lord—not the emperor or the chief priests or the gods of Rome or the idols of our own creation. This creed changed the world because those who professed it lived as if it were true. So perhaps the most important question in our churches is not "When did you invite Jesus into your heart?" but "What did you do with him once he got there?"

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# THE GOSPEL IN SEVEN WORDS

**IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY** *Brother to a Dragonfly*, Will Campbell recalls how his friend P. D. East had badgered him for a succinct definition of Christianity. East did not want a long or fancy explanation. “I’m not too bright,” he told Campbell. “Keep it simple. In ten words or less, what’s the Christian message?”

Campbell obliged his friend: “We’re all bastards but God loves us anyway,” he said. To which East replied, “If you want to try again, you have two words left.”

Campbell and East eventually had an extended conversation provoked by Campbell’s summary. It had stuck in East’s mind. He wasn’t sure he bought it, but it gave him something to think about.

The CENTURY invited some authors to try their hand at summarizing the Christian message. We instructed them to proclaim the gospel in a maximum of seven words and expand on their statement in a few sentences. It’s instructive to see what Christian proclamation boils down to when someone is put on the spot and has only a few words. What is the essence of the essence of Christianity?

The exercise can have practical benefits. Christian leaders often need to have what business consultants call an “elevator speech”—a quick way to sum up what’s distinctive and compelling about Christianity. When asked to sum up the Christian message, one must do better than, “Ah, well, it’s complicated, but . . .”

Campbell clearly thought that a pithy version of the good news needed to begin with some account of the bad news. It’s the bad news, after all, that occasions a longing for the good news. Campbell and East were friends in the midst of the civil rights struggle in the South in the late 1950s. Their lives had been defined by the racism, violence and moral evasions that pervaded that segregated society. Campbell did not exempt himself or his friend from that reality. Indeed, he thought that naming the dark side of humanity is an essential part of the Christian message: “We’re all bastards . . .”

Our respondents were not so blunt in diagnosing the human

To read all the efforts to put the gospel into seven words or fewer, go to [christiancentury.org/7words](http://christiancentury.org/7words)

condition. Many seem determined to make grace, not sin, the prominent feature. Nevertheless, sin is acknowledged in some way.

In Martin E. Marty’s “God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow,” the “anyhow” hints at the mercy in God’s welcome. Donald W. Shriver makes a similar move with “Divinely persistent, God really loves us,” as does Beverly Roberts Gaventa with “In Christ, God’s yes defeats our no.” The human propensity to mess things up and long for another chance is central, if implicit, in Mary Karr’s “We are the Church of Infinite Chances.” Interestingly, Karr was the only respondent to squeeze in a mention of the church—there’s no second chance without a church to offer it.

Other summaries present the human problem not as a matter of human character but as a matter of relational conflict or estrangement. Brian McLaren highlights the call to reconciliation; Carol Zaleski celebrates the end of captivity (“He led captivity captive”), and Ellen Charry reports that “the wall of hostility has come down.”

Charry’s is one of several contributions that draw heavily or completely on scripture. She adapts Ephesians 2:14–18, and Zaleski cites Ephesians 4:8. Lamin Sanneh quotes Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 5:19, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world.” Bill McKibben opts for the Golden Rule (Mark 12:31): “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

In “Christ’s humanity occasions our divinity” Scott Cairns manages to capture a distinctively Eastern Orthodox understanding of the gospel in which sin is not even alluded to (and he is impressively concise at only five words). Walter Brueggemann’s gospel is dense: “Israel’s God’s bodied love continues world-making.” (“I used only six words,” he says; “I rested on the seventh.”) M. Craig Barnes boils it down to four words: “We live by grace.”

One can imagine such a claim, like many others listed here, lodging in the listener’s mind, provoking thought and inviting further conversation: “So what do you mean by grace . . .”

—David Heim

HE  
LED  
CAPTIVITY  
CAPTIVE. }

Among gospel epitomes I especially love the Jesus prayer, the Agnus Dei and “When he ascended on high, he led captivity captive”—the good news as I first heard it from Paul (Eph. 4:8) and Christ’s Jubilee proclamation (Luke 4:18). Christ ascended the cross, descended to the dead and ascended to heaven to restore us to the Father. He has broken our fetters; it remains for us to shake them off and enlist in the service of self-giving love.

—Carol Zaleski

By grace we’re created in the image of God. When we corrupt our lives with sin, the grace of God in Jesus Christ forgives us and makes us fully alive again. By grace the Holy Spirit binds us to this savior, includes us in the church, moves our chaos over to create beauty, and interrupts our plans with God’s dream that we too become gracious. Along the way the holy image re-emerges in our lives.

—M. Craig Barnes

THE  
WALL OF  
HOSTILITY  
HAS COME  
DOWN. }

WE  
LIVE  
BY  
GRACE.

Christ “has broken down the dividing wall . . . that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you”—gentiles—“who were far off and peace to whose who were near”—Jews—“for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:14–18).

—Ellen T. Charry

Our no is a human rejection of God's claim on us as our creator, sustainer and Lord, a rejection that produces alienation and isolation, even from ourselves. In Jesus Christ, God unmasks and defeats that no and signals that we are not our own. We belong to God's love, from which we cannot finally flee. Grasped by that love, we are enabled to love God and one another.

—Beverly Roberts Gaventa

IN CHRIST,  
GOD'S YES  
DEFEATS  
OUR NO.

DIVINELY  
PERSISTENT,  
GOD  
REALLY  
LOVES US.

We are the Church of Infinite Chances, where every sinner is a saint and vice versa. "Sinners welcome," reads the banner on my church. Or as Blake said: "We're put on earth a little space to learn to bear the beams of love." Also, I would add, to reflect them. Without a Christos-centered worship of the crucified and resurrected Jesus, I find this impossible.

—Mary Karr

The Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is working to infiltrate the whole creation with God's love. Paul's testimony to the work of the Spirit in Romans 8 is for me the key chapter in the New Testament. Dependence on—and receptivity to—the daily presence of the Spirit makes possible faith, hope and love in a human life. In addition, Romans 8 implies a cosmic work of the Spirit: the Spirit yearns for the redemption of the whole created world, not only us human inhabitants.

—Donald W. Shriver

WE ARE THE  
CHURCH OF  
INFINITE  
CHANCES.

GOD,  
THROUGH  
JESUS CHRIST,  
WELCOMES  
YOU ANYHOW.

The gospel begins and ends with God. Jesus makes God's action good news. But the word *Jesus* alone doesn't help me; such Jesus is a nice guy, but I need Jesus Christ, God's anointed. God welcomes (or "accepts," etc.) you. According to Luther, the words "for you" are the most important in the sacraments (and preaching). "Anyhow"—fill in sin, guilt, pride, the misfires of "spirituality"—implies that you weren't welcome without this transaction, and that you bring nothing to it.

—Martin E. Marty

IN CHRIST,  
GOD CALLS  
ALL TO  
RECONCILIATION.

LOVE YOUR  
NEIGHBOR  
AS  
YOURSELF.

This always seemed like hard moral advice that very few of us were really able to follow. But in recent times its meaning seems clearer. Loving mainly ourselves—which is the definition of the high consumer society we inhabit—means creating a world that stinks. It's a world that is getting steadily hotter, where almost all of us increasingly feel economically insecure. Jesus had it figured out: It only works when we're in it together.

—Bill McKibben

According to both Irenaeus and Athanasius, God became like us so that we might become like God. Clement observes that through obedience one “becomes a god while still walking in the flesh.” Cyril avers that as we are called “temples of God and even gods, so we are.” Gregory of Nazianzus admonishes us: “Become gods for His sake.” The consensus of the church fathers and mothers is that the purpose of Christ’s coming is to endow us with life, divine life, endlessly becoming. Good journey!

—Scott Cairns

CHRIST’S  
HUMANITY  
OCCASIONS  
OUR DIVINITY.

GOD WAS  
IN CHRIST,  
RECONCILING  
THE WORLD.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus it is clear that our God is the kind of God who insists on having the last word. To be sure, the second-to-last word, which can be very powerful, can be given to something else—despair, estrangement, hurt, evil, even death. But our God insists on having the very last word, and that is always a word of hope, of reconciliation, of healing, of goodness and of life.

—Martin B. Copenhaver

By his atonement, Christ effected our reconciliation with God and invested in us—without counting the cost—so that we may become teeming vessels of witness and service to others. God was in Christ to show that the only acceptable offering we can give God is ourselves. And we give God only the life that is already God’s. Christ showed that self-giving is self-abnegation. In hymn writer Augustus Toplady’s words: “Nothing in my hands I bring / Simply to the cross I cling.”

—Lamin Sanneh

GOD GETS  
THE LAST  
WORD.

**GOD WAS  
BORN.  
WE CAN BE  
REBORN.**

The modifier "Israel" assures that God is the creator of heaven and earth, who emancipated Israel and gave the commands of Sinai. This God is fully and uniquely bodied in Jesus and his restorative life. "Continues" concerns the ongoing force and rule of God's Spirit that is the presence of Jesus. This covenantal love binds the world to God's goodness, which creates and recreates worlds (cosmic, public, social, personal) toward flourishing. This love invites creaturely engagement with such flourishing. I used only six words; I rested on the seventh.

—Walter Brueggemann

**B**irth is a messy, painful affair, fraught with risk and danger. Yet Jesus was born. Walking beside us, Jesus lifts the lowly, satisfies the hungry and teaches us to live in love. Likewise, the Spirit gives birth to us. Transforming our lives, the Spirit grounds our being, urges us to create and leads us in abundant life. The core of the gospel exists in this fecundity.

—Carol Howard Merritt

**WE ARE WHO  
GOD SAYS  
WE ARE.**

**ISRAEL'S GOD'S  
BODIED LOVE  
CONTINUES  
WORLD-  
MAKING.**

**I**n the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ we see that God is so for us and with us that we can no longer be defined according to death, a religion-based worthiness system or even the categories of late-stage capitalism. We are who God says we are: the forgiven, broken and blessed children of God; the ones to whom God draws near. Nothing else gets to tell us who we are.

—Nadia Bolz-Weber

# The power of poetic preaching

by Elizabeth Myer Boulton and Matthew Myer Boulton

**OUR SIX-YEAR-OLD** son Jonah likes to have his toenails painted. Who wouldn't, really? It's downright delightful to express yourself with color and sparkle and to receive a few precious minutes of creative, quiet and undivided attention from Mom or Dad. Why should his younger sister have all the fun?

But here's the thing: Jonah's friends at school have made it abundantly clear that when it comes to toenails, seafoam green and Superman red aren't acceptable for a six-year-old boy. So when he wants to sport those colors, Jonah has taken to doing so under cover of socks and shoes, using them as an armor-like protection against cultural forces much larger and more formidable than his four-foot frame can handle.

They start in so soon, these forces that swirl around us, threatening to sweep away not only particular delights but also, if we let them, the very heart of our humanity. A boy in our daughter's preschool class, whose father was killed earlier this year in gang-related violence, sometimes wears a crimson hoodie decorated with photos of his father on the front. Across the back is a striking, defiant message: "The father was despised, and so shall be the son." His family covers him in that sweatshirt like a preemptive protest, like armor in a world ravaged by violence, poverty and racism.

These dehumanizing forces are in the air we breathe: want, war, sexism, pornography, homophobia, domestic violence, incest and indifference. We can try to look away or think happier thoughts, of course, and we often do. But the forces are still there. We breathe in, we breathe out. Socks on. Hood up.

To speak in this way of cultural and spiritual forces is not (or should not be) to evoke some sort of invisible, sinister stuff at loose in the world. Rather, it's to take seriously the fact that phenomena like these can have a diffuse, insidious kind of power.

It's not that we aren't individually responsible for these realities—we are, but our responsibilities are also complexly shared among neighbors, between communities and across generations. And it's not that we can't diminish or even defeat these forces—we can, but they are often perplexingly tenacious and tricky, shifting and slipping beyond our grasp. As we struggle with them over time, they feel less like problems to be solved and more like foes to be fought.

On any given Sunday, whether it's a church of 30 or 3,000, people come—and those dehumanizing forces come along with them, invading and besieging the sanctuary. As congrega-

tions gather and worship, the people hear more than the scripture reading, sermon, prayers and hymns. They hear the rumbling storms outside rattling the stained glass. They hear the rain beating down on this ancient ark we call the church—and they hear the discouraging whispers in their own hearts and minds, those disarmingly credible lies that haunt us all.

When it comes to Christian preaching, then, sermons should protect people with words. In intimate, visceral, vivid ways, preachers should name and contradict the disarming lies and then replace them with equally intimate, wondrous and wearable forms of truth. Sermons should stir us to stand firm against death-dealing forces wherever we find them.

## The gospel is a mystery that can only be evoked.

You don't have to believe in cartoonish demons to recognize the power of casting all of this in terms of figurative combat, of armor and protection and foes to be fought. Yes, it's a poetic strategy, but this kind of poetry is not just a figure of speech. Metaphors are not trifles. When they fit, they capture things that other forms of language miss; they go places that prose cannot go. Sometimes poetry is the best defense we have.

**T**ake the letter to the Ephesians. The author summons us to "put on the whole armor of God" to stand against "the spiritual forces of evil." Our struggle is not against an enemy of flesh and blood, but against "this present darkness" that swirls around and within us (6:11–12).

Excellent Christian preaching names and explores these shadows in order to declare that the light shines in the darkness, and that the darkness has not and will not overcome it.

Shadows and light, arrows and armor—these are the terms in which the author of Ephesians frames the task of Christian preaching, the act of "[making] known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains" (6:19). Karl Barth urged preachers to immerse themselves not only in scripture but also in the newspaper, and Ephesians

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helps us understand how we should read them both—and, for that matter, how we should read the mundane and marvelous events of our everyday lives.

Read closely, for starters. Pay special attention to shadows and light, arrows and armor. Ask yourself which threats most clearly function as a “present darkness” for members of your community this week, in this particular time and place. Which most clearly resemble “the flaming arrows” against which only “the shield of faith” will suffice (6:16)? This is pastoral work in the deepest sense, the work of a shepherd well aware of the area’s wolves and badlands, who protects and guides the flock to green pastures and still waters.

In a world where young children are shamed into narrow gender roles, where violence shatters families and where tourism for the purpose of engaging in prostitution is on the rise, we need Christian preaching that names and stands firm against such forces and equips listeners with the poetic armor required to do the same.

Understood from this angle, Christian preaching is a kind of pragmatic poetics, a strategic attempt to draw upon the most beautiful and compelling language we have in order to confront the most difficult and deadly challenges we face. This kind of preaching is not primarily an exercise in taking a position or “prophetic stand” on some pressing issue, nor is it primarily a matter of interpreting a scriptural passage in its historical context, or even of declaring the good news of God’s saving grace with doctrinal precision.

No, a sermon is not an op-ed piece read aloud, an exegetical lecture or a doctrinally sound gospel declaration. Of course, excellent sermons will include opinions, exegesis and good news. But if the central task of preaching is to protect people with words by “[making] known with boldness the mystery of the gospel”—that is a special, distinctive type of rhetorical art.

“The mystery of the gospel” is not something that can be explained, cap-

tured or flattened out into a set of concepts. On the contrary, it can only be evoked and encountered again and again. Accordingly, making known the mystery of the gospel involves an embodied, interpersonal kind of knowledge, not an abstract, conceptual sort. In short, it involves personally and communally experiencing the mystery of God-with-us. The preacher’s task is to help foster this experience.

Fred Craddock once drew an illuminating distinction between “informational language” and “generative language.” The former, he said, conveys information about a subject; the latter generates an experience of it.

“In your next Mother’s Day sermon,” Craddock explained, “you can say ‘motherhood’ a hundred times, and it won’t do you or anyone else much good. ‘Motherhood, motherhood, motherhood, motherhood . . .’ On the other hand, if you can get us to smell burped milk on a blouse”—he paused, a twinkle in his eye, as sighs of recognition rippled through the room—“well, then you’re preaching.”

**G**enerative language is experiential language; it’s “you are there” language that collapses time and space. We smell burped milk. We see Superman red. We have experiences that, technically speaking, we aren’t actually having. The preacher paints a picture—and wondrously, we’re somehow in it, a part of it, experiencing it here and now.

What kind of words do that? What kind of language gener-

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ates a rhetorical form of experience? What kind of speech gets us to smell and see and feel through verbal, vivid vignettes?

We often call such language poetic, and sure enough, many of those savants we call poets deploy words this way exceedingly well—Ted Kooser, Mary Oliver and Billy Collins, to name a few. But the art is by no means limited to poetry. Generative language has always been a hallmark of excellent storytelling, literature, teaching, journalism and other rhetorical acts. For preachers, perhaps the best resource in this regard is Christian scripture, a treasury overflowing with some of the most vibrant, evocative and generative language humankind has ever known.

Christian preaching today would benefit from more generative language—particularly at the heart of the sermon instead of in the relatively peripheral “sermon illustrations.” At its best, generative language makes worlds with words, fostering emotional, practically sensual engagement. This kind of activity ought to constitute the sermon’s main event, not sideshows merely illustrating what is still basically an informational, conceptual exposition.

**T**here is no question, of course, that sermons should be scripturally engaged, conceptually rigorous and doctrinally edifying. But the point of scripture, theological concepts and doctrine is to help human communities properly experience and understand our lives as lived with and in God.

Sermons should be shining examples of scripture and doctrine playing this clarifying, interpretive, supporting role. Accordingly, as preachers craft sermons, we should think less in terms of little life portraits that illustrate doctrinal claims and more in terms of little doctrinal excuses that illuminate bold, vivid life portraits. To this end, generative language is a preacher’s best friend.

This all becomes clear when we remember that a Christian sermon is primarily for protecting people with words. Throughout the week, human beings inhabit a life-and-death world full of shadows and arrows, cancer and eating disorders, injustice and despair—and we therefore need armor, wearable forms of truth designed to help us live with courage, dignity and grace.

Merely being able to recite, say, the idea that “we are all children of God” will not do; we need a deep-seated, visceral sense of this childhood. What really counts is whether we can *feel* this childhood, sense it, hear it, see it, smell it and taste it—and thereby experience it often enough to truly believe it when the shadows fall.

One sermon a week can hardly provide this kind of protection. But if, once a week, a preacher can model how life is interpretable in light of the mystery of the gospel, he or she may empower listeners to do the same throughout the week.

If this is the goal, then generative rhetoric is an indispensable tool in the homiletical toolbox. “You are there” experien-

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tial language will make a sermon's shadows and light more clear, compelling and viscerally present to the congregation—making the sermon a guided experience of the sort of thing listeners can do long after the worship service has ended.

With this in mind, let us preachers don the whole armor of the rhetorical traditions the church has inherited: key lines and passages of scripture, but also the most striking, memorable, generative language we can find.

Moreover, let us put on the breastplate of beauty. Let this

## Every sermon should travel through the shadows.

beauty be seen not only in a sermon's sentences, but also in its overall form and structure. Let the movements of the sermon unfold like the movements of a symphony, complete with recurring themes, distinct emotional tones, building suspense and a strong, stirring conclusion. If the preacher opens with a lucid, accessible story, let her return to it at the sermon's close, reframing the story from a new angle. An *inclusio* can be one of the most satisfying rhetorical strategies, providing listeners with an intuitive sense of wholeness and completion.

Let us fasten the belt of poetry around our waists—and let poems be a discipline of homiletic preparation. Just as the

Christian sacraments, properly understood, open our eyes to see common bread and water in a new light, so great poetry can shape our imaginative vision and vocabulary, disclosing anew God's story in our stories.

And when we tell those stories in our preaching, let us do so with "you are there" immediacy. Too often preachers deliver stories at an arm's length, or without an underlying sense of urgency and moment. Beginning with some variation of "As I was preparing this sermon," for example, transports listeners to the pastor's study—at best a mildly interesting place and at worst an unfortunate distraction. Instead, take listeners to other places, and then rhetorically show them around, from the inside out:

Lean into archetypal stories and vignettes, classic experiences that everyone can relate to: the risk of learning to ride a bike, the ache of a broken heart or the feeling of being lost in an unfamiliar landscape. Along the way, single out details that play to the senses: the smell of a hospital room, the sound of a school bell, the weight of a hammer or the threat of an incoming storm.

Let manuscript preachers experiment with preaching without notes, if not for the entire sermon, then for portions of it. These experiments can help us discover our own storytelling style, build a different form of intimacy with our congregations and develop what the late Peter Gomes called language fit for the ear, not for the eye.

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Finally, with or without notes, let the preachers' sermons climax and close with radiant good news. Every sermon should travel through the shadows and arrows of Good Friday—but always for the sake of the empty tomb. Sermons should culminate with encouragement, hope and joy. As the rabbis long ago pointed out, even the divine words of exile from Eden, “and to dust you shall return,” end with an echo that doubles as a promise: “... you shall return” (Gen. 3:19).

**E**ven in the midst of exile, joy shakes the dust off its feet and returns. On a trip to Central America some years ago, we visited the Museum of the Martyrs in San Salvador, then stopped at the small chapel in which Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated while celebrating the Eucharist. Our mood was somber. Outside the chapel entrance, however, we noticed that bright grains of rice dotted the front walkway, and that inside, pink rose petals had been scattered up and down the central aisle.

The chancel and altar—the spot where the archbishop had fallen—were decked out in magnificent bouquets of white lilies, orchids and more roses left over from a wedding earlier that day. But to us they seemed to be signs of resurrection, bold testimony that the mystery of the gospel shall not be denied, no matter what arrows may come.

Monsignor Romero was an ambassador for this beautiful, irrepressible good news. In his preaching as in his life, he stood against

the dehumanizing forces of his time and place, and he equipped and encouraged his listeners to do likewise. As best he could, again and again, he endeavored to protect people with words.

Once the Holy Spirit had gotten hold of him, he stood firm and could do no other. He reassured victims with words of justice and new life. He challenged perpetrators with calls to repentance and the promise of forgiveness. He was an ambassador of freedom, an envoy and herald of God's dawning reign. But by the same token, he was also an ambassador in chains, standing in solidarity with a world in bondage. Following Jesus, he preached liberty to the captives—from inside prison walls.

Precious few of us are saints. But each and every one of us, in our own small way, is charged to swaddle our listeners with words that protect and encourage. To the extent that we preach at all, each one of us is an emissary of God's kingdom, an ambassador in chains. This keeps us clear about what preaching is for—and helps us choose the rhetorical tools best suited to the task.

In the end, of course, the task itself is not our work to do. We may participate in it if and when the Spirit moves. But the work of “making known with boldness the mystery of the gospel” belongs, as it always has, to God.

Should we fall silent, the great sermon of creation itself will continue apace. Color and sparkle will dance and delight as ever, seafoam green and Superman red. Even the stones will cry out. Even the blood-drenched altars will one day give way to new vows, and petals, and impossible joy.

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## Connections that last

**WHENEVER I VISIT** my parents in Kentucky, we make the rounds of our holy places: first, a visit to our favorite bookstore; next, a trip to the Abbey of Gethsemani for vespers and compline. Then we visit the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, a living museum known to the locals as Shakertown.

Like Shakers everywhere, the Shakers who made their home in Kentucky sought to create a paradise. They shared their goods communally. They practiced equality. They lived celibate lives so that erotic attachments would not hinder their common life. They worshiped God with dances taught to them by angels in dreams and visions. And they created buildings, tools and furniture that are works of art. As Thomas Merton wrote, what makes a Shaker chair so beautiful is that it was made by "someone capable of believing that an angel might come and sit on it." The creation of every room, every staircase and every table was, for the Shaker craftsperson, a prayer.

I love the buildings in Shakertown most of all. There is something about the way they occupy space that makes them seem an organic part of the landscape. They are profoundly still, yet seem on the verge of speaking. They seem perfectly proportioned, silent and in tune with the space around them and the sky overhead. Like Merton, I imagine moving into one of them just to hear the silence, just to watch the light moving through the rooms.

A few weeks ago I made a pilgrimage to my own local Shakertown, the Hancock Shaker Village in western Massachusetts, to see an exhibition of photographs of Shaker villages in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and New York made by WPA photographer Noel Vicentini, who was hired by the Federal Art Project in 1935 to document Shaker art for the Index of American Design. In our age of political gridlock, it is startling to remember that our government once launched an ambitious jobs program, one that regarded artists as workers whose work could help the nation explore what it means to be an American.

Vicentini photographed the Shaker villages nearly a century after Shaker artist Hannah Cohoon painted the trees of life, blazing with energy, that came to her in visions during the years when the buildings were full of Shakers. Vicentini captured the end of that quiet paradise, Eden going to seed. The few Shakers who appear in his photos look careworn and isolated. The buildings are marked by broken windows, cracks in walls and ceilings, water damage and missing clapboards and shingles. Dark clouds hover over many of the photos, and weeds grow

up around the magnificent round stone barn in Hancock. Vicentini shows us what it looks like when something precious is coming to an end.

It is interesting to see what captured Vicentini's attention at this moment of disappearing. He had been sent to document uniquely American art, and many of the photographs are familiar Shaker images: the single bonnet hanging on the peg board, the empty room filled with light. Vicentini captures the stillness and eloquence of the buildings even as shingles slip from their roofs.

Vicentini seemed most interested, however, in the places where one thing attaches to another: a bridge connecting two buildings, a drainpipe attached to a wall, a latch on a door. Vicentini seemed to find in these places of joining something fundamental about the Shaker art.

The Shakers have not disappeared from the earth—a community in Maine is alive and well—but Shaker life in the villages that Vicentini photographed did come to an end. His photographs bear witness both to the coming end of a community and to what remained: an American art in which function and need inspired forms of great beauty created by men and women who drew near to their God through their work. The art continues to speak even though its creators have fallen silent.

It is hard to look at Vicentini's photographs and not wonder what museumgoers a century from now will see of our lives in another time when so much seems to be slipping away—from the ice at the top of the planet to our country's infrastructure to certain kinds of jobs or particular forms of religious life. What will disappear, and what will remain from our own in-between time? When he photographed the disappearing Shaker villages, Noel Vicentini seemed to find continued life in the places where one thing had been joined to another: a handle attached to a door or a latch so carefully crafted that it closed perfectly every time. He took detailed, up-close photographs of these things so that Americans of the future could study them and learn something about the relationship between Shaker design and who we are.

Perhaps one thing we can learn from his efforts is that finding useful and beautiful ways of joining one thing to another—or one idea to another, or one person to another, or one community to another—matters, and will continue to matter even as so much else comes to an end.

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*Stephanie Paulsell teaches at Harvard Divinity School.*

## Religion in decline?

by Grant Wacker

**R**oss Douthat knows how to throw a punch. Readers accustomed to his regular *New York Times* op-ed column likely will expect *Bad Religion* to be a moderately conservative, carefully nuanced book. It is not. *Bad Religion* offers a deeply conservative, hard-hitting examination of the devolution of American Christian culture from the high ground of the 1950s into the swamp of the 2000s. It calls modern Christians to return to the intellectual rigors and ethical demands of their historical tradition. Douthat does not frame his call in the roundly qualified locutions of the academy but in the straightforward, almost adversarial prose of a prosecutor's brief. Here's my case, he effectively says. Consider it, make a decision and think and live accordingly.

The book's argument is clear and simple. In the boom of economic and cultural confidence that followed World War II, the main or central or orthodox (he uses those terms interchangeably) stream of Christianity exercised commanding influence in the broader reaches of American life. Douthat supports this claim with an array of statistical data about church building and attendance, but the argument mainly rides on the rails of four case studies: the midcentury careers of the Reformed intellectual Reinhold Niebuhr, the evangelical preacher Billy Graham, the Catholic television personality Fulton J. Sheen and the Baptist social reformer Martin Luther King Jr. Though these men represented different traditions and outlooks, individually and together they exerted both extraordinary and extraordinarily constructive influence on the culture.

Enter the 1960s and things began to fall apart. Multiple influences flowed

together, including the growth of political partisanship within the churches, the destabilizing (albeit liberating) effects of contraception, the relativizing impact of the new global consciousness, and the unprecedented surge of financial prosperity, which left traditional vocations less attractive and the three-day weekend more attractive. Seeking to accommodate rather than challenge those trends, uncounted Christians followed Harvey Cox and friends into the Secular City.

Those moves did not work. The mainstream churches lost members, and seminaries lost students. Yet American society, like most societies, shunned a void. And so it was that a river of heretical faiths flowed in to fill that gap—faiths oblivious to the great paradox of a God who became human, of humans who reached for perfectibility in the midst of depravity, and of a church that strove to live simultaneously inside and outside the world. Douthat summons G. K. Chesterton: "When people turn from God, 'they don't believe in nothing—they believe in anything.'" In the latter decades of the century, Americans saw biblical scholars wandering in a desert of "lost Christianities," prosperity preachers pandering to people's greediest instincts, Oprahified mystics adrift in a sea of self-discovery, and pundits confusing the biblical city on a hill and its rigorous demands for justice and mercy with a nationalistic city on a hill and its smug sanctification of the American Way of Life.

Douthat acknowledges that he writes with pessimism about the future of American culture and the religious streams that nourished it, but like that of all real Jeremiahs, his pessimism is quali-

**Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics**

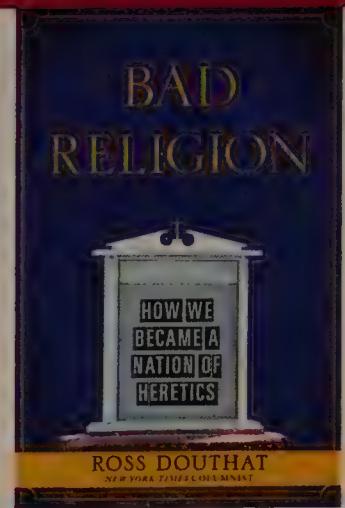
By Ross Douthat

Free Press, 352 pp., \$26.00

fied. He hopes American Christians will return to the wellsprings of their tradition. Such a faith should be "political without being partisan," "ecumenical but also confessional," "moralistic but also holistic" and "oriented toward sanctity and beauty." It can be done. Witness the enduring light of Catholic author Flannery O'Connor, of United Church of Christ member and author Marilynne Robinson, of evangelical Republican environmentalist and antiwar activist Mark Hatfield and of Democratic pro-life politician and activist Sargent Shriver. Still, nothing is uncertain. "For us," Douthat quotes T. S. Eliot, "there is only the trying." Neither civic nor Christian life promises happy endings.

*Bad Religion* can be challenged. Minor factual errors crop up here and there. Billy Graham's parents worshiped in a Presbyterian, not a dispensationalist, church, and Eisenhower never said that democracy depended on "a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is." The slippery-slope thesis—that American religion declined from a Golden Age in the 1950s to an Iron Age in the 2000s—is overargued. Though Douthat candidly acknowledges that other readings of the postwar story are possible, he underplays the mainstream's internal fractures and cultural limitations. Niebuhr harbored doubts about Graham's revivalism, and Graham harbored doubts about the later

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King's conflation of civil rights with anti-war protest.

And whether mainstream Christianity today is as impotent as he suggests is problematic too. After all, the majority of Supreme Court justices are practicing Catholics; the president of the United States is a member of the impeccably mainstream United Church of Christ; and the *CHRISTIAN CENTURY* and *Books and Culture* command respect in midtown Manhattan. Beyond that, Douthat overstates the centrality of the center in the 20th century and understates the power of the secular critique of orthodox Christianity in the 21st.

That being said, Douthat's work offers a brilliant and compelling analysis. It is crisply written and mercifully free of jargon, and it reflects an intimidating range of primary and secondary sources. Little wonder that he has served as a senior editor of the *Atlantic*, a film critic for *National Review*, the youngest-ever op-ed columnist for the *New York Times*, a sparring partner for Bill Maher and a regular guest on *Charlie Rose*, *PBS NewsHour* and the *Colbert Report*. Most important, the book's main argument should prompt American Christians to stop and take stock. There really was a time, not so long ago, when a distinguished Harvard philosopher could (only half facetiously) call for an "Atheists for Niebuhr Club," when a Billy Graham sermon could be printed in full in the *New York Times*, when a Catholic priest could outpoint Milton Berle on prime-time television, and when a Baptist preacher from Georgia could win the Nobel Peace Prize. At the same time, when a major study of today's twentysomethings finds that the majority thinks that "nobody has any natural or general responsibility or obligation to help other people," we know we are in trouble.

It is not clear whether *Bad Religion* is history or sociology or theology or cultural criticism, but it is clear that it is a book that thoughtful believers should go through, not around. C. S. Lewis once said that the one prayer God never answers is "encore." Douthat's sobering work prompts fear that Lewis might be right. But it also prompts more than a little hope that he might be wrong.

## How the Church Fails Businesspeople (and What Can Be Done About It)

By John C. Knapp

Eerdmans, 192 pp., \$15.00 paperback

In business we are often confronted with situations that are not simple black-and-white issues of justice, in which we must discern not what is the single right thing to do but what is the most right thing to do.

In *How the Church Fails Businesspeople*, John Knapp tells the story of Alan, a businessperson who is facing a slowdown in his business and is therefore running short of cash. At the same time, a client is having difficulty in paying his bill, the payment of which would significantly improve Alan's cash flow. Several months earlier, Alan talked with this client, who asked for more time to pay his bill. Alan relented at that time, but now with his own cash-flow issues, he is ready to call his attorney to begin legal action.

At the last minute, Alan is struck with the tensions between the financial, legal and spiritual implications of this decision. He calls his pastor to arrange a meeting, hoping his pastor's advice will help him sort these tensions. When they meet, however, the pastor gives him a less than helpful response. He simply asserts that "business is business" and advises Alan to put his own interests first.

For Knapp, this case study highlights the great divide between work and faith. Businesspeople are often discouraged from bringing their faith into the business world. At the same time, the world of the church is oblivious to the business world and the challenges that businesspeople face. This great divide leads to fragmentation in people's spiritual lives.

Alan's is a true story. It came out of a research study that Knapp and some seminary students conducted with 230 people across a variety of occupations, denominations and demographic criteria. Respondents were asked to identify a particular episode in their work life in

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which they had confronted an ethical issue. The study yielded two important conclusions. First, "Christians across a broad spectrum of occupations had little difficulty recalling ethical challenges encountered in their work lives." Second, "an overwhelming majority report that the church had done little or nothing to equip them for faithful living at work." They observed that clergy seem to be preoccupied with weddings, funerals and private issues in life, and not with the public or occupation-related issues that consume most Christians' workweeks.

Knapp asks: "How would things be different if believers at work learned to tap the wellspring of Christian wisdom?" To answer this question, he begins by laying out the contributions that the worlds of business and the church both make toward the fragmentation of people's faith/work connection. The business world and business education encourage a moral relativism that claims that matters of faith are unwelcome or even irrelevant in the boardroom. At the same time churches,

and specifically clergy, lack a true understanding of the complexities of the business world and as a result are reluctant to draw connections to it in the pulpit or to provide business-related counsel.

Next Knapp discusses the need to rethink our understanding of vocation and to develop a moral theology of work. He suggests that "Christians are seldom encouraged to think of 'secular' work as truly important to God." On the contrary, he contends, each of us has both a primary and a secondary calling. We are all first called to follow Christ and second to do so in a particular context.

This is consistent with what my church espoused when I was growing up. Anabaptist theology teaches that all are ordained, as part of our personal commitment in baptism, to the prime task of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Adult baptism, in my tradition, bestows on each member the power to minister. In practice, however, we often end up blessing or ordaining only those going on to perform service for the church. This

sends a message to the rest of the members that their calling is secondary and that as a result they are not as accountable for building God's kingdom.

Knapp suggests that the fundamental problem here is the church's definition of Christian vocation. "God grants us freedom," he says, "to explore and develop ourselves, and much of this activity occurs through work. This essential point is too often missing from church teachings on vocation." I have often said, sometimes to raised eyebrows, that as an employer I have as much influence on people's spiritual lives as my pastor does—or more. Work is the primary locus in life for many people. I have seen lives change dramatically as people meet challenges and trials at work.

The church is missing out on a significant missional opportunity. As Knapp says, "Too often the church portrays itself as a place of refuge rather than a spiritual gymnasium to strengthen Christians for the transformative work they must do in the world." Equipping members for



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ministry in their workplaces may become the preeminent role of the future church community. This would be a very different church from the one my parents and grandparents attended, where the main focus of ministry and the recipient of resources from its members was the local congregation. But a church that is attentive to the workplace is more in tune with the realities of and opportunities for kingdom building today.

"The moral terrain of our work lives," Knapp says, "is mostly defined by law and economics rather than theology, leaving us with an uninspired ethical pragmatism lacking in wisdom and heart." So he proposes a moral theology for work that focuses on Micah 6:8, and specifically on acting with justice, kindness and humility so unconditional love becomes relevant in the workplace.

Knapp's suggested theology resonates strongly with what I experience daily at work. He argues that it is "possible for an ethic of love to undergird the Christian's life and witness in today's workplace." I

observe so much woundedness in our workplaces, and so many people's lives lack unconditional love. Herein lies a great opportunity for organizational leaders to develop a workplace culture that promotes healthy structures and relationships.

I do wish that Knapp's invocation of unconditional love went a bit further. We can't love others when we don't have sufficient love for ourselves. When I have leaders in my organization who believe they are unconditionally loved, employees experience higher levels of work satisfaction and productivity than when I have someone in a leadership position who doubts being unconditionally loved. I find this a truism for leaders in all organizational types, including church institutions. Those of us who are entrusted with selecting organizational leaders must place this condition on an equal level with competence if we are to have organizations that realize Knapp's dream of "equipping Christians for vigorous discipleship in public life."

According to Knapp, if things are to

change within the institutional church, a basic reformulation is needed of the type of leadership that pastors provide. Churches will need to escape the sacred/secular and private/public dualities and acquire a different set of skills, including collaborative leadership, courageous conversation and more inclusive storytelling. Knapp asks, "How different might our understanding of discipleship be if the church's narrative told of bankers, bakers, teachers, and truckers—the living body of Christ in action?" He proclaims, "Equipping Christians for vigorous discipleship in public life may be the church's best hope for bringing the gospel to a world desperately in need of God's love."

This book pushed me beyond my previous understanding of the role I can play in my church and business communities. It challenges both businesspeople and pastors to redefine what it means to be relevant to a new generation of church members longing for deeper integration between their professional and spiritual realms.

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## Never Say Die: The Myth and Marketing of the New Old Age

By Susan Jacoby

Pantheon, 352 pp., \$15.95 paperback

**S**usan Jacoby is an important truth teller who, in a series of books, has addressed key critical issues in our society. She brings great candor and moral passion to her accessible, journalistic narrative writing, which combines careful research, anecdotal material and her own experience. In this book she takes up the social construction of old age. The core idea, developed in many directions, is that old age is real and inescapable, that for many people it is dreadful and that it cannot be resisted by the illusions of our society.

Jacoby contends that our society is engaged in willful denial about old age. Relying on narrative accounts of unusual persons, we characterize old age as a time that offers the prospect of well-being, happiness and an extended season of fulfilled,

satisfied living, but it is not that way for most people. Jacoby's book penetrates the illusion and honestly addresses the dismal prospects of aging people—prospects that have important policy implications.

Her particular target is the boomer population, which she divides between "early boomers" and the "later boomers," who have different agendas. The boomers feel entitled, she argues, not only to get it all and to get it all now, but to continue with uninterrupted flourishing and well-being into old age. Such a prospect is a myth that is enhanced and reinforced by the marketing of products that are said to fend off the erosions of old age.

According to marketers, those who have the right diet, the right exercise, the right clothes and the right cosmetics (and no doubt the right surgery) will not get old in debilitating ways:

We're going to be just like the actress Betty White, hosting *Saturday Night Live* at age eighty-eight. We'll be paying our own way, overwhelmed with job

offers, and in good enough health to work as hard as we always did. We'll be perfectly able to take care of ourselves.

A self-declared atheist, Jacoby allows no spiritual palliatives. She is unflinching about the bodily reality of aging that will not be changed by manipulative strategies because the body will not and cannot be sustained forever in health. We belong, she insists, to the animal kingdom, and we share the future of that regime.

Jacoby exeges boomer self-deception in five essays that are relatively independent discussions but nonetheless overlap. First, she discusses Alzheimer's as a "neurobiological catastrophe," a widespread and still spreading social reality for which there is currently no remedy, no prevention, not even a slowing down. Jacoby is highly critical of "junk thought" that imagines that Alzheimer's can be conquered and that continues to offer false hope and reassuring possibility for which there currently is no basis. Given that reality, she urges the deployment of government resources that would provide the palliative care that families without adequate resources urgently need.

Second, Jacoby offers an incisive discussion concerning the fact that the problem of old age is particularly acute for women, both because women live longer than men and because in a patriarchal society, they are often left without adequate resources. Women in general are poorer than men, and racial and ethnic minority women are even more so. With reference to her own mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, Jacoby comments on the acute "social loneliness" that is faced by women who are left behind. She observes that such women are expected not to "let themselves go," so they must attend to make-up, hair and clothes so they can "age gracefully," all of which requires a lot of effort and expense.

Third, she explores the economic status of old people, many of whom have insufficient resources. The stereotype of wealthy "old geezers" misrepresents the true state of affairs:

Reviewed by Walter Brueggemann, whose most recent book is *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Fortress).

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The American penchant for instant gratification, coupled with opposition to higher taxes that would create a larger government-financed social safety net, spells huge long-term economic trouble for the old—particularly the oldest old—in our society.

Jacoby draws a compelling contrast between the social safety net of European society and the inordinate individualism that precludes such social protection for the old in the United States.

Fourth, in a discussion that borders on cynical, she refutes the common claim that old people are wise: "There is as much proof of the wisdom of old age as there is of the medical efficacy of holy water from Lourdes." She judges that there is continuity as people grow old. People who were wise early may continue to be so, and those who were not, will not be. Here is a comment that exemplifies the realism with which Jacoby refuses any romantic palaver to the contrary:

People who live with ardor, integrity, and wisdom continue to do so as long as their brains remain intact. Those whose lives have been defined by boredom, dishonesty, and intellectual laziness also continue their earlier course.

*Never Say Die* culminates with two reflections, one on dying and one on public policy. First, death is inevitable, so it requires careful planning and intentionality, including a living will. Beyond that, Jacoby speaks a good word for suicide in specific cases. She laments the legal requirement that people be kept alive when they wisely and knowingly consider death a preferable alternative. Concerning social policy, Jacoby judges that longevity is no unmitigated gain because extended life is as likely to be a burden as a freedom to be enjoyed. Long-term retirement may eventually become "a passport to boredom and purposelessness for many old men and women who like to work and are healthy enough to do so."

The book finishes with a shrewd reflection on the politics of health care and the growing tension between the political will of old people and the rising self-assertion of younger people who may or may not be committed to guarantees for the old.

Both the liberal and conservative economic nonsense about old age—a self-serving combination of wishful thinking and politically motivated lying—must be jettisoned if we are ever to begin a meaningful, reality-based discussion about intergenerational responsibility and the lives of old people not only today but in the future.

Though without illusion, this book exhibits great empathy for old people, whom Jacoby wants to be treated with care and for whom she wants to see humane policy. She stays focused on the denial of aging and does not probe the way in which it is a subset of the more systemic denial that pervades our socio-



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economic system, all in the service of an uncriticized market ideology. Still, this is a book to which attention must be paid. It reads like a summons, calling truth tellers to tell their truth.

## Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism

By Alvin Plantinga

Oxford University Press, 376 pp., \$27.95

I once heard Isaac Asimov tell the great physicist Freeman Dyson that Newton's laws are trivial—so trivial that his dog could understand them. Asimov challenged Dyson to explain how his dog could leap in the air and catch a tennis ball in midflight if the dog didn't understand the physical laws controlling the motion of the ball.

At some level Asimov was right. A dog, and a center fielder for that matter,

must understand something about physics to catch a ball in flight. But this level of understanding—for both dogs and professional baseball players—rarely, if ever, includes knowledge of the differential equations Newton developed to describe the trajectory of masses in gravitational fields. In fact, such knowledge would prove of no value to a baseball player who took the time to acquire it.

According to evolutionary theory, our minds, and those of our dogs, developed in response to reproductive challenges. Genes for greater intelligence spread through the gene pool when those genes enhanced reproductive success. This seems straightforward: dodging projectiles launched by enemies and catching coconuts as they fall from trees certainly seem like useful survival traits. In what sense, however, is one's reproductive success enhanced by solving the differential equations associated with falling coconuts? Surely we have learned from the social structures of our high school

lunchroom and from sitcoms like *The Big Bang Theory* that such skills actually interfere with reproduction. Our brains, it seems, have been shaped to develop beliefs about the world that are relevant for reproduction but have little to do with truth. So if purely evolutionary forces are entirely responsible for the production of our brains, we have no reason to suppose that the beliefs produced by those brains—including belief in evolution—are true in the traditional sense.

The celebrated and controversial philosopher of religion Alvin Plantinga suggests, in *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, that when such problems are pursued to their logical conclusion, they lead to a profound conflict between naturalism and science. This extraordinary claim is deeply counterintuitive. Naturalism and science are typically seen as bedfellows—or even as the same thing, with two different names. Not so, says Plantinga. He contends that naturalism (the belief that nothing exists beyond the phenomena of nature which science studies) and science itself (which includes our conceptual models of that reality) conflict so profoundly that we can't embrace both of them.

A worldview that contains only science and naturalism, Plantinga contends, lacks adequate grounding for the rationality of that science. If scientists are nothing but collections of molecules of the sort they study in the lab and are governed by the same laws of chemistry, on what basis should we suppose that their pronouncements about those molecules are true? In such a world, scientists are equivalent to robots or talking smart phones. If we hear our GPS-equipped phone tell us "your destination is on the right," we take it seriously only because we know there is a larger world of satellites, programmers, mapmakers and engineers out there. There is a rational grounding for the pronouncements of our talking phones. But what is the rational grounding for the pronouncements of talking scientists?

Plantinga rejects as irrational the

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Reviewed by Karl W. Giberson, who teaches at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts, and is author of *The Wonder of the Universe* and *Saving Darwin*.

position held by people like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens that naturalism and science can be simultaneously embraced as true. "If my argument is cogent," he writes near the end of the book, "it follows that there is a deep and serious conflict between naturalism and evolution, and hence deep conflict between naturalism and science."

Though it is provocative and counter-intuitive, Plantinga's argument is not new. Darwin himself expressed a similar doubt in an 1881 letter to a friend:

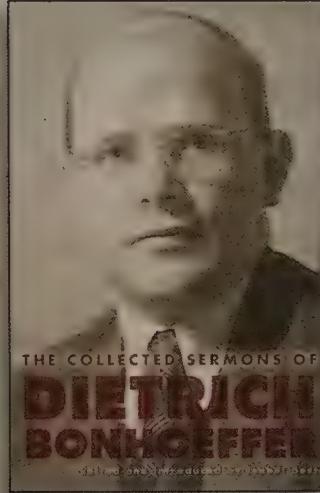
With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?

In 350 pages of lively, if occasionally dense, prose—sprinkled with logic equa-

tions and corny jokes, and occasionally presented in a smaller font when the discourse is more specialized—Plantinga wields his logical rapier across much of the terrain where battles are being waged between traditional believers and the New Atheists. On various grounds he challenges the widely embraced belief that evolution is "unguided." For starters, evolutionary theorists have certainly not shown that it is. Until such

time as actual—or at least plausible—pathways from, say, a light sensitive pigment to our complicated eye have been specified, we should not say we know that God was not guiding the process in some way. There is no need to define evolution as if it requires a belief that it is unguided. Furthermore, if the evolutionary process is driven entirely by unguided natural selection, how can we have any confidence in the brains mak-

## *The foundation of everything he did...*



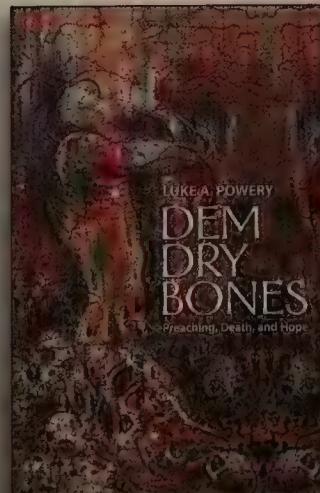
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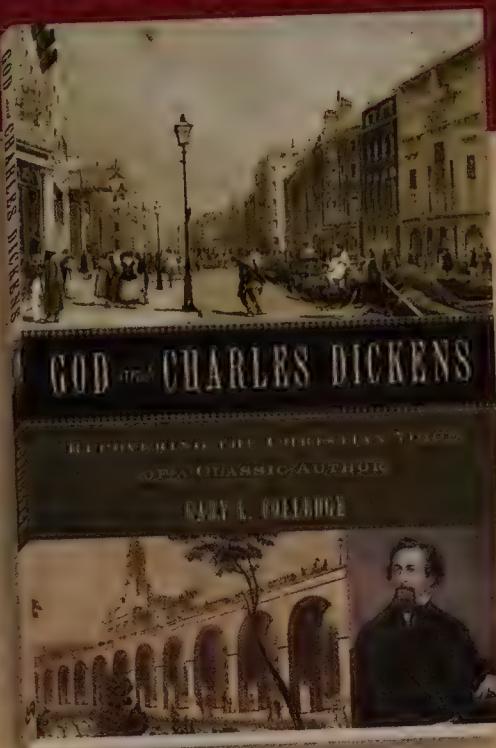
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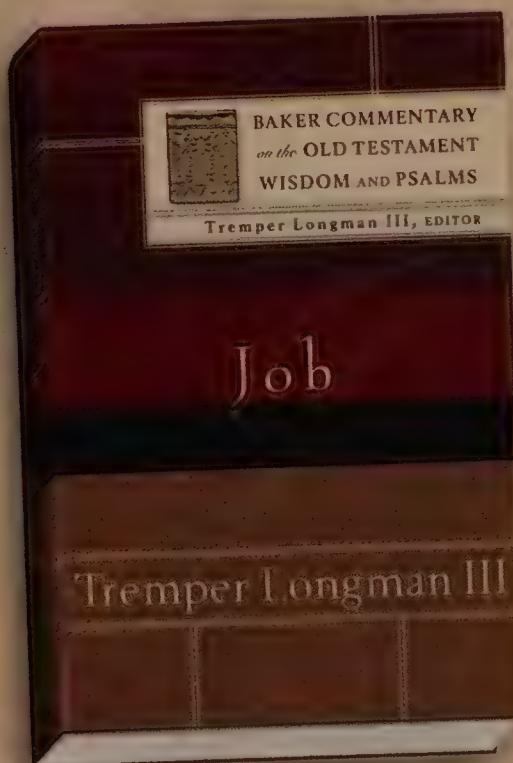
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ing the assertions in the first place? How do we avoid Darwin's horrid doubt?

Plantinga points to evidence in the fine-tuning of the universe and in the work of intelligent design theorists like Michael Behe that some sort of guidance is at work in natural history and that unguided, purely natural processes cannot do everything on their own. However, I don't think that Plantinga should be so impressed with intelligent design arguments of the sort made by Michael Behe, and I wish he had been more careful in his own arguments in this regard. In one place he rebuts Behe's critics with a single reference that is more than 15 years old. On the other hand, I do find Plantinga's cosmic fine-tuning argument provocative.

Whatever we think of Plantinga's arguments, we have to take him seriously. This is the greatest strength of the book. One of the preeminent philosophers in the world, Plantinga has written more than a dozen books, many of them published by Oxford University Press. He held a chair at Notre Dame for many years, and he has given the Gifford Lectures three times. A dozen books have been written about Plantinga, analyzing his ideas and his contributions to philosophy.

Unfortunately, Plantinga's New Atheist dialog partners—Dennett, P. Z. Myers, Jerry Coyne—often respond to him with superficial hyperbole rather than careful philosophical arguments, so his philosophical arguments don't get much of a hearing. Consider the ontological nature of God, which Plantinga discusses in a few places in this book. Consistent with traditional philosophy of religion, he notes the implications of God's being a necessary being—a being that exists by definition. Philosophers have long wrestled with this nuanced, complicated and elusive idea. Many philosophy students are not sure what to make of it, but it is far from trivial.

New Atheist Jerry Coyne, author of the acclaimed book *Why Evolution Is True* and of an entertaining and bombastic antireligious blog of the same name, writes of Plantinga's discussion of the possible necessity of God: "No theologian in the world is going to convince me that it's impossible for God to fail to exist because

he's a 'necessary being.'" How does Coyne know that God does not have this deep ontological property of being necessary? Because of science, of course: "Science has shown that he's not 'necessary' for anything we know about the universe." Apparently, for Coyne God is nothing more than one of various entities in the universe that may or may not exist, depending on what science has to say. God is like an Internet cable that is no longer necessary once you have wireless. Needless to say, this is not the philosophical meaning of the word *necessary*.

*Where the Conflict Really Lies* is an ambitious volume. Although it is unnecessarily demanding in places, a careful reading repays the reader with insights developed by one of the sharpest minds in the conversation.

**Swallowing the Sea:  
On Writing & Ambition,  
Boredom, Purity & Secrecy**  
By Lee Upton  
Tupelo Press, 168 pp., \$16.95 paperback

Upton is an award-winning poet, novelist and critic who here writes about the writing enterprise. This is not a how-to manual, and it would be a mistake if only other writers or would-be writers were to read *Swallowing the Sea*. Readers will find themselves becoming more self-aware as readers, not to mention receiving many reading suggestions. Upton ponders emotions and experiences common to all humans—such as those named in the book's subtitle. Her poetic gift shows in her often sparse prose, which at times can stop readers in their tracks. For example, in the chapter on secrets she writes: "In a totalitarian society, private life is official business. Our most treasured secrets belong to the state."

## BookMarks

**Home**  
By Toni Morrison  
Knopf, 160 pp., \$24.00

Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison's 10th novel, *Home*, explicitly picks up on a theme that has been crucial to both her fiction and her nonfiction over several decades: the idea of making a home within a divided nation. In this novel, Frank Money, a Korean War veteran, travels from Seattle to the small town in Georgia where he was raised, a place that he has long loathed and associated only with violence, rejection and personal misery. He is on a mission, he believes, to save his little sister from unknown peril. *Home* is a short book that does not have the full character and plot development of most of Morrison's work. It reads partly like an allegory, partly like an elegy for a rural southern way of life, partly like a meditation on redemption, but its individual pieces do not fully cohere and the characters seem like shadows moving across a stage; just as we feel we are about to get to know them, they disappear. On the other hand, Morrison's writing is luminous, and anywhere you open it, the book has individual sentences that sing.

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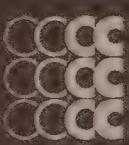
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# ON Media

**Sherlock**

Created by Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, based on the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle  
Directed by Toby Haynes, Euros Lyn and Paul McGuigan



**UPDATED SLEUTH:** Benedict Cumberbatch plays a modern-day Sherlock Holmes in a hit British TV series.

Theologians have long posited a God who is omniscient. The British television show *Sherlock* (six episodes have been produced, with more planned for 2013) delights us with a human being who is omniscient. This spiffed-up version of Arthur Conan Doyle's detective series about Sherlock Holmes has a recurring motif: Holmes, played by the spot-on (as the Brits say) and impossibly named Benedict Cumberbatch, tells us everything he can see that other mortals cannot.

For example, Holmes immediately spots that his future colleague, Doc Watson (Martin Freeman), is a war veteran and so asks, without introduction, "Afghanistan or Iraq?" "Sorry, how did you . . ."

That's not all he knows. Holmes notices that Watson's therapist thinks his injury is psychosomatic: "Quite correctly, I'm afraid." Holmes always explains things later through ultrafast editing, wooshing close-ups and Cumberbatch's voiceover. It never fails to thrill. Freeman's Watson regularly sits back in awe, exclaiming, "That's amazing." Such self-congratulation in the script shouldn't work, but here it does.

*Sherlock* circa 2011 is a different animal from the Victorian stories created by Doyle, but it constantly tips its hat to its predecessors. Holmes and Watson live and work, like the original characters, at 221B Baker Street—but this pair must regularly explain to outsiders and each other that they are not gay (with even more nonchalance than Jerry Seinfeld's line "not that there's anything wrong with that"). This Holmes has the same

nicotine addiction as the original, but he satisfies it with patches rather than a pipe. He pairs with detective Lestrade again, but now the tools of their trade include text messaging and a blog that details the exploits that have made Holmes famous. A literal hat tip to tradition comes when Sherlock wears a deer-stalker hat like his 19th-century predecessor—only here it is in a failed attempt to hide from paparazzi.

The ultimate update is Cumberbatch's portrayal of Holmes as a genius on the Asperger spectrum. A jealous detective at one point denounces Holmes as a psychopath, to which Holmes replies: "I'm a high-functioning sociopath. Do your homework."

A sensational character in the story is the city of London itself, which appears in full glory—cabs, phone booths, cobblestones and narrow streets, the London Eye and Buckingham Palace. The show is mainly shot in Cardiff, but it sizzles largely because of its city setting. London is a fast-moving, diverse and utterly secular place. Religion is a literary reference only, a databank of language and history, useful for the solving of crimes, less helpful for the living of lives.

*Sherlock* is the brainchild of Steven Moffat and Mark Gatiss, who previously collaborated on the revived version of

*Reviewed by Jason Byassee, senior pastor at Boone United Methodist Church in North Carolina.*

*Doctor Who*: Their greatest coup in *Sherlock* is devising the conclusion to season two, "The Fall" (nothing to do with the biblical one), in which Holmes's archenemy, Jim Moriarty, corners him, and in the ensuing conflict Holmes commits suicide. This is faithful to Conan Doyle's telling of the story of Holmes's faked death—except the master's version never produced a body. *Sherlock* does—down to the crunch on the sidewalk and a blood-soaked Cumberbatch, inspected by none other than Dr. Watson.

But at the end of the episode we see Holmes very much alive, watching Watson grieve at his (empty?) grave. A writer for the *Guardian* asked: "Who or what lies in the grave over which Martin Freeman's Dr. Watson delivered the lovely soliloquy that made around 7.9 million Britons' stiff upper lips tremble on Sunday night?" Freeman did indeed deliver: "Just do this for me, Sherlock. Don't be dead." He's not. But how can that be? Season three awaits.

The creators are giddy that no one seems to have noticed the clues they left or added them up to a satisfying whole. Does the answer lie with the request Holmes made to the pathologist with a crush on him? Does it have to do with the crisps in his pocket or with the man who bumps into Watson on his way to inspect Holmes? Who knows? We don't have Holmes's gift of omniscience.

But even Holmes's omniscience is still human and not divine. One of the most endearing moments in *Sherlock* is the episode in season two, "The Hounds of Baskerville," in which the detectives think they're chasing genetically enhanced animals. It turns out they are dealing with cold war-era chemical weapons (a timely theme in the era of terrorism—a topic not otherwise touched on in the show). Holmes is irritated that his mind cannot catch up to the facts. Like the rest of us, he's mortal, making mistakes, unable to see the patterns. He can see only the evidence right in front of him—extended by the technology in his handheld device.

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by Philip Jenkins

**A** proverb that circulated in the former Soviet Union held that the future stays much the same but the past changes from day to day. Less cynically, we might say that as a society develops, people naturally develop interests in new historical topics, and academics turn their attention to these emerging issues. In the case of Christianity, the growth of churches outside the traditional West has led to an upsurge of scholarship about the early histories of African and Asian Christianity, and these histories are being written with the fresh eyes of writers from those regions.

Ever since Westerners discovered Asian cultures in the 19th century they have been intrigued by possible relationships between the two great transnational faiths, Christianity and Buddhism. In 1916, George Moore's best-selling novel *The Brook Kerith* portrayed a Jesus who survived the crucifixion only to recoil from the preaching of the emerging Pauline church and eventually join a group of Buddhist monks evangelizing the Judean countryside. Many other books through the years have presented pseudo-scholarship of varying degrees of wackiness, regularly presenting a Jesus who acquires sacred wisdom in various corners of the mystic Orient.

Such speculations should not for a second be confused with the solidly grounded work on Christian history and thought that has emerged

## Jesus meets the Buddha

from modern-day scholars who seek to give a theological basis to the Asian churches which have grown so powerfully over the past generation. Asians represent one-seventh of all Christian believers, and that number is growing mightily. Naturally, those people want to understand the Asian contexts and origins of their faith, and scholars are seeking to accommodate them.

Among theologians of Asian Christianity, we find such great Catholic figures as Aloysius Pieris and Peter Phan and Protestants like Kosuke Koyama. Asian (and Asian-American) scholars have been at the forefront of postcolonial research on the Bible—focusing on how differently non-Western readers approach the scriptural text from Euro-Americans—and the quite distinct cultural baggage the latter bring with them. The results can be startling.

One prolific author is R. S. Sugirtharajah, of Sri Lankan origin, who teaches at Birmingham University in England. Although he ranges widely in his interests, he is particularly interested in the possibility of South Asian linkages to the New Testament itself and to early Christianity more broadly. Any attempt to draw such connections has to be made cautiously, given the dismal track record of past efforts, but Sugirtharajah makes a strong case.

He shows how the campaigns of Alexander the Great brought the Hellenistic world into contact with Asian societies. Indian emissaries reached the West, while Central Asian Greeks encountered Buddhism. An early Christian interest in Indian affairs surfaces in apocryphal texts like the *Acts of Thomas*, and of course India's truly ancient Christian communities proclaim Thomas as their founding evangelist. For this reason, Sugirtharajah claims the sizable body of Thomas literature as a critical tool for approaching Asian Christianity, even citing the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* as “an interesting starting point for Asian hermeneutics.”

I am usually skeptical about claims for direct Asian influences on the Mediterranean world, but one of Sugirtharajah's examples intrigues me. In the Epistle of James, the King James translation of verse 3.6 declares that “the tongue ... defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature.” Different translations offer widely varying versions of the words here translated “course of nature,” but the Greek phrase is *trochos tes geneseos*, which can be rendered “wheel of birth.” That sounds distinctly Buddhist or Hindu, especially in the context of describing the evil effects of improper speech.

As Sugirtharajah says, “If there is any influence of Eastern ideas, it is here that it is visibly prominent.”

The whole Epistle of James has attracted Asian thinkers. In his classic *Water Buffalo Theology*, Kosuke Koyama cited James as the most promising means of introducing Christianity to Southeast Asians, especially to Buddhists, who would feel immediately at home with its style of writing as much as its teachings. This is, he notes, just what popular Buddhist scriptures look and sound like. Asian wisdom literature sounds a lot like Judeo-Christian wisdom literature, including James but also Thomas. The Dalai Lama himself is no less enthusiastic about James, praising James's declaration that human beings are a mist, a vapor that rises and vanishes away. What a wonderful image, he says, for the transience of human life!

Of course, none of these scholars is arguing for the existence of secret Buddhist cells in the early Jesus movement. Rather, they are pointing to the universal character of the scriptures, which were written in what was already a highly globalized world. And they are also saying that Asians, no less than Euro-Americans, have the right to read the texts in light of their own traditions.

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Philip Jenkins recently wrote *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses*.

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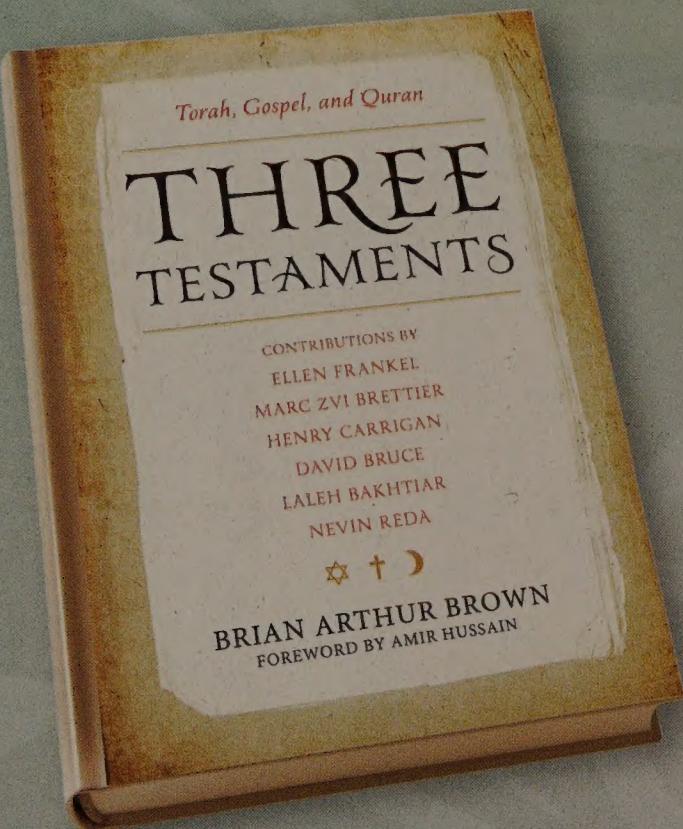
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